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ALDYTH.

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HENRY S. KING & CO., LONDON.

A L D Y T H ;

OR,

"LET THE END TRY THE MAN."

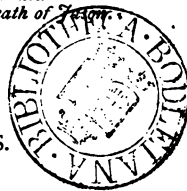
BY

JESSIE FOTHERGILL,

AUTHOR OF "HEALEY."

"Let them find their life
Bitter and sweet, fulfilled of strife,
Restless with hope, vain with regret,
Trembling with fear, most strangely set
Twixt memory and forgetfulness.
So more shall joy be, sorrow less.
And surely, when all this is past,
They shall not want their rest at last."

MORRIS—*Life and Death of Jesus*.



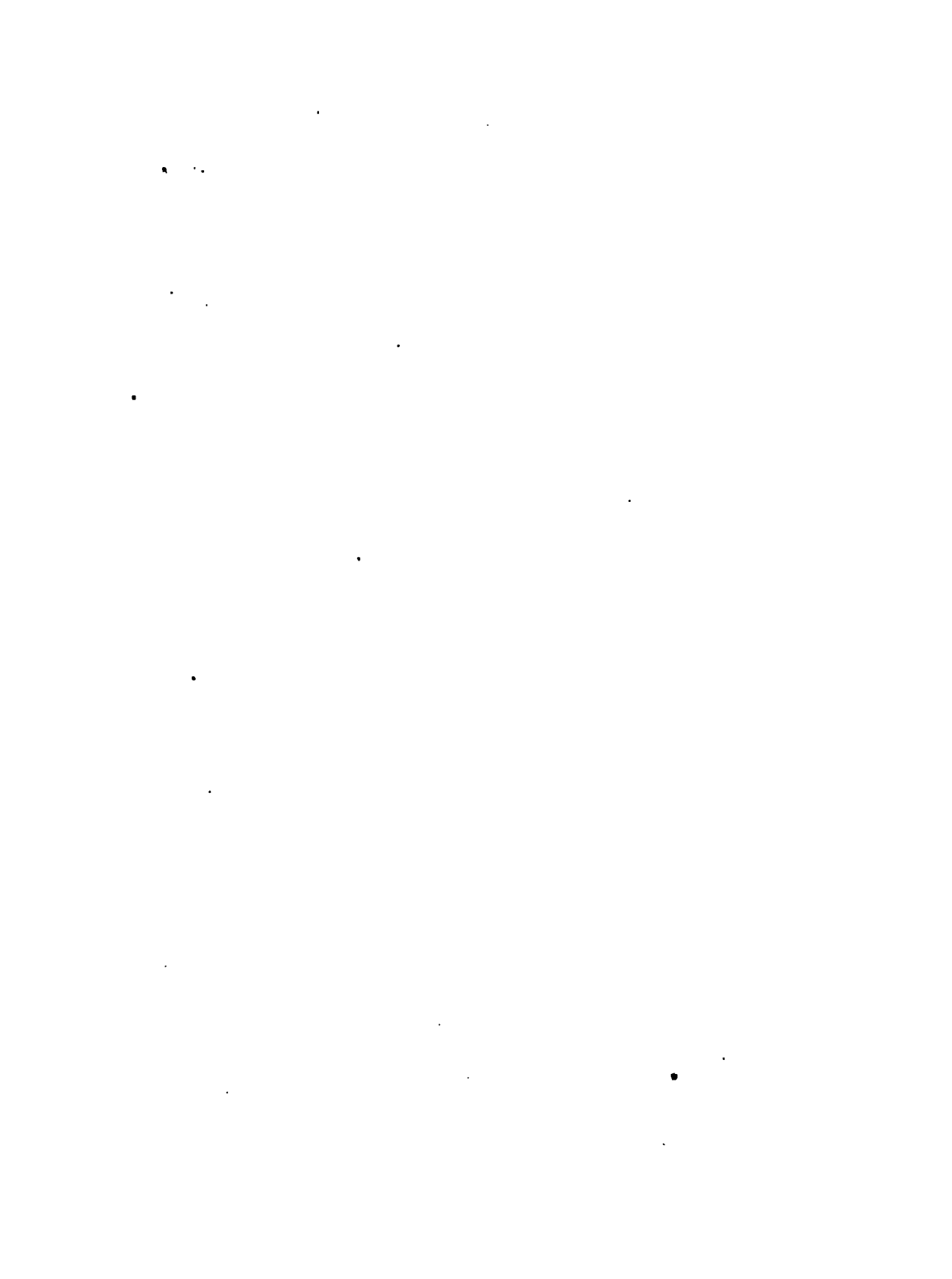
IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

HENRY S. KING & Co., LONDON.

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ALDYTH.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

“POOR CAROLINE!”



WE saw little of the Sweynsons for some weeks after Harold brought his bride home. Lucy appeared at church on the Sunday after her arrival, after which it was the duty of Campion towards its neighbour to go and call at Follyfoot upon the earliest opportunity. Bravely, nobly, conscientiously, it fulfilled its duty. Every one who had the ghost of a shadow of an excuse for calling, put on her best bonnet and light kid gloves, armed herself with her card-case, and called.

“Chiefly,” said Lifton to me one day, “be-

cause they know the marriage is not liked by his people, so they go to take a rise out of the women."

"Do they get what they go for?"

"No, certainly not, if I may judge from what I saw when I called. (And, by-the-by, I as nearly as possible asked for 'Miss Sweynson,' instead of 'Mrs.')

I only saw Aldyth and the bride. The children were at their lessons, and Esther was practising. The two were apparently absorbed in fancy work, and were perfectly amicable."

"What is she like?" I questioned, eagerly.

"Pretty little thing, but beside those other girls . . ." (And he shrugged his shoulders.)

About that time, too, the rector went away for some weeks, so we had no reading, and I often wondered much what they were doing at Follyfoot; and at last I received authentic information upon the subject . . . authentic, but not satisfactory.

It was an afternoon in May. The east wind in which we had been rejoicing for a fortnight had departed (for a season at any rate), and the land had rest. I was in the garden. Stephen had wheeled my chair there, and with a small table, a rug, and a whole box of books, come from Mudie's that morning, I was in a state of

the truest luxury. I had had the box of books brought out, too, but refrained, with epicurean self-denial, from even looking at them till I had finished "Yeast," towards the close of which I was coming. I was wondering what Lifton would say about it when I asked his opinion. I knew he would not be satisfied with it, and yet there were passages in it which stirred my soul.

Pausing to reflect upon one of these, I raised my eyes, and saw coming across the lawn towards me, Caroline Sweynson.

I shut up my book joyfully, and prepared for battle with a gay heart. I expected battle; it usually came to that between us.

"I have come to see you," was the only salutation.

"Thank you kindly. Your charity must and shall cover a multitude of sins. But why alone?"

"Because no one else would come with me. Emma has got Cecily Ferriers for the day. Aldyth has gone to see old Ferriers, and Madame Lucy's nerves are of that delicate character, that she cannot face the chance of visitors undefended, therefore Esther is with her."

"To pick her up in case she faints?"

"I suppose so. Perhaps a too sudden ring

at the bell (she being alone) might bring on hysterics."

"Oh!" was my reflection, "here's a pretty state of things."

Caroline proceeded to sit down upon the rug.

"You want a chair," said I. "I've got a hand-bell here, and if I ring, we can have one brought."

"Don't, on *any* account. I've been sitting upright on chairs and sofas till I should like to lie down and kick and roll like a pony in a field."

"I can shut my eyes for ten minutes, if you like to do it now," said I, obligingly.

She made no answer, but presently she did lie down, and clasped her hands under her head, looking with wide open blue eyes into the sky.

I looked at her. This was not the old Caroline, not even the Caroline of our last reading at Hoarstones. Her face was discontented and sullen, her brows were contracted into a frown, and upon her lips was that sneer that always made me feel uneasy—"Edmund's look," Aldyth called it.

"Caroline," said I, speaking on the impulse of the moment, "you do not look happy."

"Do not I?" (in an indifferent sort of way).

"No. Do tell me what it is that puts you out. I wish I could help you."

"Do you *really* care, Philip?" (suddenly sitting upright). "Would it make you sorry if I were wretched? Would you try to help me if you could?"

She said this eagerly, looking at me with her keen eyes almost hungrily, questioning me as I never had been questioned yet.

"Can you doubt it? I love you all as if you were my sisters."

"That is not much" (scornfully). "Harold is our own brother, and look what he has done."

I was silent. She presently said,

"But I do believe in a good deal of what you say, and to show that I do, I am going to tell you all that has happened since dear Lucy" (with a sneer) "came."

"Don't speak in that way," said I, uneasily.

She laughed and went on:

"It is all just as I thought; she wants to alter everything and change everything, and Harold lets her do just her own way. Even Aldyth does not oppose her as she ought, and because I will not be dictated to by her, I am always in disgrace. I have been in disgrace

ever since she came. I am in a state of eternal punishment."

"What *have* you been doing?" I asked, in dismay.

"Oh, various things. I would not allow her to say what books I ought to read, for one thing. I told her Aldyth allowed me to read what I chose, and I didn't care whether she approved of it or not."

"That was foolish."

"Humph! Then I sent a message to a friend of Bob's—Wilson, his name is—and I know all about him. She heard me talking to Esther about it, and she giggled and said it was *improper*" (with a crimson face). "I told her she had better mind her own business. Harold was there, and he said if he ever heard of my doing such bold, unladylike things, he would not allow me to write to Bob at all, as if *he* could stop me if I chose" (between her teeth); "then he sent me out of the room, remarking that if he heard any more impertinence to 'my sister'" (with another sneer), "I should apologize. *I* apologize to Lucy Lestock! Not if he *starved* me!"

"Oh dear! I had no idea it was so dreadful."

"Aldyth wishes Harold to let us go and live

somewhere else, at the Dower House, for instance, with Miss Barton, but he would not hear of it; he is such a tyrant. Of course he will listen to nothing reasonable."

"Well," said I, diffidently, "it does seem rather absurd to go and leave such a large house as Follyfoot to two people, does not it?"

"Not in the least; besides, we have Scripture on our side. Think of the texts in Proverbs about women's tongues that I could quote, and the remarks about living in a small house where there is peace, also about feeding on herbs where love is, and finally, my favourite text, about braying a fool in a mortar, and yet not ridding him of his folly."

"Caroline!"

"Oh, don't look so shocked; you know you are not at heart."

I was, though, and terrified as well at her bitter words, and the sneer on her lips. Could this be Aldyth's very sister?

My next remark was incautious, if not idiotic; I said,

"So having been driven from home, you have come to tell your grievances to me?"

"Driven from home? Not a bit of it," she answered, sharply. "So far from it, I intend never to rest until Harold is driven to do as

ALDYTH.

was. They—at least Esther—was saying that Harold would not have it in the house. I cut them, and went to play croquet.”

After a pause she added,

“Now I think I must be going. . I dare say you have been awfully bored with listening to me ; indeed, you look quite weak. Shall I tell your man to bring you some brandy ?”

“Caroline, what do you mean by talking so ? I am most awfully sorry you are so bothered at home. Would you have me laugh to show my sympathy ?”

“Not unless you like. I assure you I do nothing but laugh while I am at home. Lucy hates being laughed at . . . so I do it, you know. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” I answered, trying to smile, and failing, so without another word she walked off.

“Poor Caroline !” That was the reflection that arose in my mind in connection with her. In after years, when she was beautiful, and admired, and flattered, it was with me still—“Poor Caroline !” Aldyth spoke of her as “Poor Carrie !” oftener than in any other terms. For all her vivacity, we knew she was sad. Though she made it her rule in life to laugh at every one and everything, the laugh was often bitter,

and as years went on the sweetness decreased, but not the bitterness; that grew; and after thinking of her for a full half-hour, my meditations wound up as they had begun, with a sighed-out "Poor Caroline!"

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW REGIME.



THE state of affairs at Follyfoot was little happier than Caroline had represented it to me.

Day after day passed, and as time went on, Aldyth found, with ever-increasing certainty, that she and Lucy could never "act together." Whether they could remain on terms of passive disagreement was daily becoming more and more uncertain.

Had Aldyth been alone, she could have borne many things, or she could have left her brother's house and lived where she chose. But that might not be. Esther, Caroline, and Emma were living and obstinate facts, impossible to be glossed over or effaced. Harold was their guardian, in conjunction with old Mr. Ferriers. To him Aldyth had not yet appealed, but she

always calculated upon him as a reserve in case of need.

One day she had a conversation with Harold, in which she urged him to let them go and live elsewhere.

"It would be better for all of us," said she.

"RUBBISH!" ejaculated Harold, striving to make up in intensity of emphasis what he lacked in argument. "I'll not have it. A pretty thing indeed that my sisters and my wife cannot live together under the same roof, but must be apart! It is not the thing for a young girl like you to be setting up a house apart from me. You are too young, and there is no reason for such a thing."

"There would be Miss Barton, and I think there is ample reason for it. If our mother had been living she would have left Follyfoot as soon as you were married, without waiting for all this; and since we could not leave *before* you married, we ought to do it now."

But Harold was obdurate. He had made up his mind that it was not the thing for his sisters to live apart from him; and he was, likewise, determined to let them know that, as he chose them to be all together, they must learn to do as he chose. This was only the beginning of the struggle; he was fresh and untried, and he had

had no experience, all of which negative influences had more weight with him than he knew or thought of.

"Let me hear no more of this, Aldyth," said he, decisively; "it is not my intention for you to live elsewhere than with me, and I hope you have better sense than to make mischief wantonly."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I am no judge of women's quarrels; but this I *do* know" (with great emphasis and heartfelt conviction), "if any quarrels do arise it will be from no fault of Lucy's. She is most anxious to keep peace and be friends."

"I shall certainly not stoop to pick quarrels," said Aldyth, rather scornfully. "If all depended upon me, Harold, you know perfectly well that not a word would be said, but I cannot answer for my sisters."

"Cannot you?" (with great irritation). "Then I am sorry for you. You used to be very particular as to who should teach them, and I let you have your own way. Much good it seems to have done. If you cannot answer for two chits like those, I will. They shall learn that I *must* be obeyed."

And then he stormed out of the room, leaving Aldyth with a stormily heaving breast and a

bitterly wounded spirit, but without a tear in her eyes.

Such scenes had occurred more than once, before Lucy had been a month at Follyfoot. Each one was always succeeded by a period of outward calm, but the feeling of soreness and bitterness they left could not be called merely skin deep. It went far, and struck root deep down in the nature of both brother and sister. Aldyth grieved, wept in secret, and then grieved again, cursing the day on which Lucy Lestock's foot had ever passed their threshold.

Harold held by his wife, naturally, and, man-like, wondered how on earth those girls, with nothing to do all day but cultivate their feelings and be friends, came to fall out.

So I suppose it must be for many years, until we have better learned the lesson of life, and practised more the precept of tolerance. Man goes abroad after his business, comes in contact with his fellow-men, and has the universe and the affairs of nations with which to occupy his mind. Woman stays at home in "her sphere;" and when all the little petty interests and hopes and fears clash, she quarrels with her sisters. Then man, who, according to many respectable authorities, is a matchless combination of justice, logic, and reason, being appealed to, mildly

wonders "what the deuce they are quarrelling about *now*." Being told, he says "Pooh! be reasonable," often adding, to show his own superior logical powers, "There is no making women see reason; they have none—they are such fools." Not all women have the readiness of dear Mrs. Poyser (a particular favourite of mine) to answer, "Yes, God Almighty made them to match the men."

As Lucy grew more familiar and at home at Follyfoot, she began to find power sweet, consequently to use it, consequently (she being an ignorant and foolish woman) to abuse it. Perhaps Aldyth might not have the wisdom of Solomon, but she had the God-like gift—a great, generous, and beneficent heart, to which no abuse of power could give pleasure. Her rule, therefore, had been benevolent; those she ruled had loved her, and looked up to her as few women of her age are looked up to.

It galled her to see the household ways she had been used to set aside, to watch the beautiful order and pleasant regularity with which one thing had succeeded another under her sway, give way to fitful alternations of hurry and idleness . . . now a mad fit of bustle when every servant was engaged upon some tremendous piece of work suddenly conceived, and as sud-

denly ordered to be forthwith begun . . . when you might ring for half an hour and no one would answer the bell except the old nurse. Then a long interval, in which nothing whatever was done; the rooms neglected, the waste newspapers and pamphlets accumulating, the meals behind-hand, the mistress herself entirely preoccupied with . . . say a piece of fancy-work, which took up her whole energies, and in the working of which she must in nowise be interrupted.

All this annoyed Aldyth. It annoyed her too to see her mother's rooms turned upside down; the old carpets done away with, new and gay ones put down; the faded tapestry curtains replaced by gaudy merino ones; the cherished old furniture, and dearly-loved quaint ornaments swept away to make room for all kinds of flimsy meaningless odds and ends.

Those rooms would to Aldyth have been sacred—not a shred of their surroundings and contents would have been changed, if they had been colourless with age and falling to pieces with infirmity.

But these new doings called up no remark from her; she felt the disgust both of a tasteful woman and a loving daughter at seeing the sweet time-mellowed things, with their many memories,

thus disregarded ; but that would not move her to complain. Neither did she speak even of the irregular meal-times which now constantly occurred. The servants grumbled, naturally ; they were old retainers, many of them, and Aldyth's rule had been a loved one ; Lucy's was not. Lucy was indignant—amazed, that they should complain. The impertinence of servants was too much. "Would Aldyth expostulate with them—with Parsons and her husband the butler?"

"Certainly not," replied Aldyth, decisively.

"Why not?" (plaintively).

"I am not their mistress. Nothing on earth would induce me to interfere between a mistress and her servants, unless indeed I were out of my senses. But not before."

"I never heard of anything so unkind. They have always known you. A word from you would quiet them."

"I doubt it. And I would not consent to rebuke servants without first knowing whether they were in fault."

"What! Do you mean to say that *I* am wrong?"

"I know nothing about it, and, as I said, I must decline to interfere."

"But what did you do if a servant grumbled and was impertinent?"

"None of my servants ever were, except one, a stranger, and I gave her notice at once."

"As if I could give Parsons notice!" said Lucy, pettishly.

"I have said already that I cannot interfere," answered Aldyth.

And Lucy found that Harold would not listen to these complaints either. "Oh, I know nothing about domestic affairs," said he, when she poured out her tale to him, not without tears. "Ask Aldyth. She always knew what to do."

"I have asked Aldyth, and she will not help me in the least. She is most unkind."

At which Harold muttered something, and did ask Aldyth, the next time they were alone, why she was so deuced disobliging? Why could not she tell Lucy how she used to manage?

"I did tell her."

"She says you would not help her in the least."

"I declined to be a go-between in her quarrels with the servants. She said they were impertinent, and asked me what I did in such a case. I told her. What more would you have?"

And Aldyth coldly turned away, rejoicing—

she could not help it—a little, that Harold should find Lucy less than perfect.

But such a life was not what she had led, and she could not accustom herself to it. There was nothing harmonious, nothing peaceful, nothing dignified. And the worst of it was, that it must go on being like this. Unless she could escape from Lucy's circle, this jar must continue, and grow daily more and more palpable and discordant.

Follyfoot, which she had loved so much, was now the merest distasteful prison-house to her. It was home no more. It never would be home again.

Such was her existence now—a weariness and a vexation from morning till night.

Caroline and Esther were in firm, persistent opposition to Lucy : Caroline defiant, insulting, and (whenever she could be) disobedient, and aggressive ; Esther calmly, coldly, contemptuously inimical. She showed, by a thousand little words, deeds, and gestures, that she considered her sister-in-law utterly beneath her notice—a person only to be tolerated as a necessity. Nothing disturbed her equanimity ; nothing goaded her to temper, neither did anything seduce her into the faintest show of cordiality. Her behaviour it was that ruffled and

angered Lucy more than all; for it seemed to say, "What you do or think can be of no consequence to me. You are not of any importance to my life. Your path is of quite a different kind, and I cannot be troubled to notice your proceedings."

As yet there had been no open quarrel. That was yet to come. The embers were smouldering; it needed but the faintest breath to kindle them.

What brought about the climax was as slight a cause as could have been wished for the deadliest quarrel—it was neither more nor less than Caroline's visit to me, Philip Darwin.

CHAPTER III.

WARS AND RUMOURS OF WARS.



WHEN Caroline left me that afternoon it was not quite five o'clock. She sauntered slowly through the Hoarstones woods, across the Boundary Brook, and home.

Instead of going in, she went to the croquet lawn, where she found Emma and Cecily Ferriers. She amused herself for some time by teasing them, and then asked Emma if Aldyth had come in.

"I don't think so," said the child.

Caroline tossed down her mallet and walked along the terrace to the drawing-room window, gathering on her way a handful of flowers—wallflowers, pansies, and daffodils, with a sprig of lad's love to sweeten all.

She walked in at the open window, and came

upon a tableau which gave her the keenest satisfaction.

There were several people in the room : Lifton Darwin, Mrs. Leslie and her daughter Sybil, and last, not least, the great lady of the immediate neighbourhood, Lady Henry Mostyn, with a gentleman visitor.

Esther was there, too. She, Lifton, Lady Mostyn and her visitor were seated near the window in a sociable group. Lucy was in the background, conversing with Mrs. Leslie and Sybil. She looked very flushed and excited—it was new to her to have aristocratic visitors : to Esther it all came as the most ordinary thing.

But what vexed Lucy was that Lady Mostyn addressed herself entirely to Esther, scarcely noticing *her* after the first greetings. And Lifton Darwin had drifted as naturally to them as a magnetic needle turns to the north.

Caroline entered upon this scene, and those quick eyes of hers took it all in. She herself was not in the most unruffled and scrupulously tidy condition imaginable. She had crumpled up her piqué dress with lying on the grass at Hoarstones ; she had tossed her hair in the same process till it looked like a waste of gold, with the loosened violet ribbon wandering

through it ; her little browned hands were innocent of gloves. Her hat, perhaps, was not *quite* as straight on her head as might have been wished by her best friends, and loosely in her left hand hung the bunch of homely flowers. She looked very, very lovely, with that look, so *méchante*, and so attractive.

She came forward with her usual manner of calm *savoir faire*, shook hands with Lady Mostyn and Lifton, and then went to greet Mrs. Leslie and Sybil.

"Come here, Caroline!" cried Lady Mostyn, as soon as this was over, "I want to show you to Mr. Bruce. This is Miss Caroline Sweynson, a very great friend of mine, Mr. Louis Bruce."

"I have no objection to being introduced," said Caroline, seating herself, "but I am not a foreign curiosity, Lady Mostyn, to be *shown to* people."

Lady Mostyn laughed, and said, "You have evidently not just emerged from the school-room."

"No, I have not. I have been" (looking at Lifton) "to see your brother Philip. Why don't you bring him here?"

"I asked him if he would come, but he preferred to explore the box of books that came this morning."

"How very charming," said Lady Mostyn. "I like your brother, Mr. Darwin; he is such a nice, quiet boy. Are you and he great friends, Caroline? I should hardly have thought so; I thought you preferred rough boys?" laughing, and shaking her head.

"Only one rough boy," said Caroline, carelessly. "I only know one, you know."

"Ah, that Robert of yours. By-the-by, he never came to see me in the Easter holidays. You and he—I told you always to come."

"He went to stay with some schoolfellows," said Esther.

"Ah, I see. Then, at Midsummer, Carrie, you must come twice, if you will."

"Thanks; I am sure we should both enjoy it very much," said Caroline, who *could* put on a polished manner when she chose.

Lady Mostyn had no children, and Caroline and Robert had always found in her a sympathetic ally.

She then rose to take her leave, immediately after which Mrs. Leslie and Sybil went too. Lifton accompanied them, saying he would show them a short way home through the Hoarstones woods.

Then Caroline tossed aside her hat, and pushed back her hair, saying, "How hot it is!"

"*Caroline*," began Lucy, in a deep voice, threatening of coming storms.

"Well?" (defiant, and on her stilts at once).

"Pray, do go in at the hall-door another time when you come in, especially if you are so untidy as to-day. I was ashamed for my visitors to see you. Look at yourself, and you will see what an object you are."

Caroline glanced at herself in the pier-glass, and said, in a voice of the coolest contempt, "I am perfectly fit to be seen. We always do come in at the window, and Lady Mostyn is no stranger to *me*."

The very faint emphasis on the "*me*," though appreciated by Esther, was hardly perceived by Lucy, who, however, went on in a severely preaching tone,

"There was no necessity for you to come into the drawing-room at all. You are rather young to be present when there are visitors, and another time I should prefer you not to come in unless I send for you."

"*Should* you?" (turning full upon Lucy, her eyes blazing with anger). "I shall come into the drawing-room when I please. We have always been in the habit of seeing visitors; we have not to practise and get up our manners for the occasion. And as for coming in *when*

you send for me" (with an awful sneer), "just try whether I will, that's all."

"You impertinent, shameful child!" (with a choking kind of sob). "Leave the room this moment."

"No," answered Caroline, not in a loud, but in a very distinct voice; after which she sat down in an easy-chair, and opened an album full of likenesses.

Lucy did not repeat the order, knowing how futile such a step would be. She cried a little, and said that Caroline made her life perfectly wretched, at which the culprit indulged in a frightful grimace behind the album, meant to express her satisfaction at Lucy's remark.

Finally, Lucy bethought herself of another sin committed by her evil-minded sister-in-law, and she said, with some approach to animation, "Did I hear you tell Lady Mostyn you had been to see Philip Darwin?"

"If you were listening to what I said you probably did. Oh, Esther, look here; this is the old likeness of Maddy Weston, with the striped dress. We called it the hyæna for a long time, you know, till Ned wrote under it, 'Stripes for the back of a fool.' I thought it was lost. Do you remember it?"

"Perfectly," said Esther, looking over

Caroline's shoulder with much apparent interest.

But Lucy, bearing in mind Harold's admonition to her . . . "Stand up to those girls, and don't take any of their nonsense," said, "It was a most improper thing to do, and I wonder—"

At this point Aldyth came into the room; she had her bonnet on, having come straight from the pony-carriage into the drawing-room. Looking round her, and beholding Lucy's flushed face, Caroline's arched brows, and set look of defiance and rebellion, and Esther's smile of cool disdain, she paused.

"Oh, Aldyth!" cried Lucy, "if you will not interfere with Caroline I must get Harold to do so. She has been to call upon Philip Darwin." (Here Lucy gave a little giggle, stamping herself upon the spot as a vulgar-minded woman.) "I tell her it is most improper, but she seems lost to any sense of what is becoming."

"I think you hardly know what you are talking about," said Aldyth, in a tone of such intensely haughty coldness that even Esther looked up, smiled approvingly, and then continued her work.

"May I ask in what the impropriety consists?" continued Aldyth, more freezingly still, if possible.

"It is not the thing for young ladies to call upon young gentlemen." A laugh, scornful, yet amused, from Caroline.

"I never heard that it was not the thing for one child to go and amuse another, who is deprived of the pleasures of most lads of his age."

"Well" (dropping that subject, and entrenching herself behind another), "I should like to know whether you approve of a *child* as untidy as that bursting into the room when I have visitors?"

"I did not *burst* into the room; you know I did not; and when you say that I did, you tell an untruth." This from Caroline in a voice of cool, deliberate insult. She had braced herself up for conflict, and was prepared to enjoy the battle, be it never so bloody.

"An untruth! You accuse me of telling *lies*, miss."

"Don't 'miss' me, if you please," retorted Caroline, loftily. "As you said just now, it is not the thing."

"Caroline came into the room, from what I can gather," interrupted Aldyth, "when visitors were here. *Your* visitors or mine, may I ask?"

"Mine, of course," retorted Lucy, angrily; "Lady Mostyn, and several others."

This Aldyth doubted, for Lady Mostyn had

made a state call upon the bride three weeks before, when Aldyth had been out as now, and she believed that this visit was to her.

"I am sorry to have it to do," said she, ringing the bell, "but I must know all about this." (To the butler who came in.) "Whom did Lady Mostyn ask for this afternoon?"

"For Miss Sweynson, ma'am."

"What did you say to her?"

"That Miss Sweynson was out, but Mrs. Sweynson and Miss Esther were at home. She said, 'Then I will see Miss Esther.'"

"You may go."

The man left the room, and Aldyth went on, "It seems, then, that no discourtesy was offered to *your* visitors. And now I have to ask what Caroline did. I cannot comprehend how she could be rude to Lady Mostyn : . . If she has been she must apologize."

"I don't know that she *was* rude to Lady Mostyn," said Lucy, testily. "What I complain of is, her coming into the room at all in such an untidy state, and then saying loudly to Lady Mostyn and Mr. Darwin that she had been to see Philip. It *is* improper. I shall tell Harold the whole story, and insist upon his interfering."

This last cut was a piece of gratuitous spite.

Mrs. Harold Sweynson had been worsted so far, but she knew,—who better?—what a martinet Harold was upon some points, and she would have her revenge.

“That will be your best plan,” replied Aldyth, coldly. “I shall also trouble him to hear my opinion upon the matter. Perhaps you will be good enough not to mention it till after dinner.”

“Don’t suppose I shall see him before dinner,” was the sulky response.

Aldyth went upstairs to take off her bonnet, and Esther followed her. Caroline remained where she was, out of a sort of bravado, which led her to do anything that she thought would be likely to annoy and exasperate Lucy. Harold came in that afternoon in rather a serener and more complacent frame of mind than usual. He whistled loud as he hung up his hat, and strode upstairs to dress.

But in the drawing-room were his women-kind, wife and two sisters, silent, dignified, and majestic; Esther apparently utterly abstracted in a book, Aldyth diligently embroidering. He planted himself upon the hearth-rug, and surveyed them. All women, his wife and sisters—all, legally, under his authority in most things, all decorous, feminine, orthodox (so he believed). Could he manage them? Of course he could.

He meant to show them, should any more disputes arise (he hoped they had shaken together at last, but if anything *should* happen), that he was master, and would stand no nonsense. Lucy was a dear little thing. What *could* make any reasonable woman disagree with her? But he flattered himself that his last conversation with Aldyth had had a salutary effect upon her mind, and had brought her to her senses. She really could be one of the most sensible of girls when she chose. Pity there was a fund of such unfeminine and obtrusive obstinacy in her disposition, which occasionally was much in the way.

So far had Harold's mind progressed, only in different words, when it suddenly occurred to him that the very silence which permitted such extensive mental excursions, had in it something remarkable, if not ominous. He lifted his eyes, and looked at the three girls . . . they neither looked at him nor at each other. There was something oppressive in their silence. Poor Harold! There is something about him at once pathetic and ludicrous as he stands there, reflecting upon his own lordship and might—all unconscious of the wave that was rolling towards him.

Before he could utter any remark dinner was

announced, and they all went to the dining-room still in that entire and ominous silence. A most uncomfortable dinner. Neither of his sisters spoke either to him or to his wife. Aldyth's face was pale, and so unusually cold and inimical, that even he noticed it. Esther looked as usual, pale, indifferent, and self-possessed. (She was always self-possessed except with one person.) Lucy was frowning and pouting—neither pout nor frown added to her beauty, which was of that order requiring a placid and contented, not to say an ever-smiling, expression, to *be* beauty at all.

Lucy was thinking all that had happened over again, and anger was in her heart. She could not forgive Caroline's insulting words to herself. Hers was a nature which always, after receiving a slight or an injury, began to cogitate upon how best to *serve out* the offender. Carrie should be served out. She would strike while the iron was hot, that is, while the offence still rankled with such keenness as to make her able to get up a great amount of heat and anger and virtuous indignation while speaking of it.

Harold never sat over wine when he was alone. In a very few minutes after they had gone into the drawing-room he joined his wife and sisters, sat down by Lucy on a couch, and

put his arm over the back behind her, saying, "Well, Loo, my dear."

Poor Harold! I say again. Truly, I feel for him. Instead of a responsive smile he heard a plaintive voice, which said, "Harold!"

"Well?"

"I want to tell you something. I want you to exert your authority in my behalf."

"What's up now?" (in a tone of slight alarm).

"Only what is happening every day," said Lucy, in a tearful voice; "Caroline . . ."

"The deuce!" burst from the doomed victim.

"My *dear* Harold!"

"You will oblige us all by listening to what Lucy has to say, Harold," said Aldyth, her full, harmonious voice sounding in strong contrast with Lucy's high-pitched, complaining tones.

"Drive away, then; but it's a confounded shame to think that a fellow . . ."

"Listen to me, Harold," said Lucy, very decidedly, and not very good-humouredly. "I wish to put it to you whether you think it right for your sisters to be going about alone, unattended, to make calls upon young gentlemen?"

Lucy Sweynson was not conscious of falsehood when she said that. She could not help,

by her nature, giving vague, exaggerated, distorted accounts of things.

Esther's smile was worthy of Caroline, and Aldyth said, "Please confine yourself to facts."

"What on *earth* do you mean?" said Harold, sitting bolt upright all at once. "My sisters . . . calling upon gentlemen!"

"Caroline went to see Philip Darwin this afternoon" (from Esther, in whose tone was more than a tinge of contempt).

"Yes," proceeded Lucy, "and I do not think it is at all proper that she should do so. Her impertinence and disobedience are bad enough without her going among boys to make them worse."

"Caroline went to see Philip Darwin" (impatiently). "Well, and what then?"

"*Then* she came home, walked into the drawing-room, where I had visitors" (Aldyth let this pass), "in a most untidy and unladylike state. When I expostulated with her afterwards, she defied me. When I told her to leave the room, she flatly refused, and then said I told lies."

Here Lucy used a flower of rhetoric in the shape of tears—plentiful tears.

"She must be mad," said Harold, very angrily.

"She has vowed to set me at defiance," sobbed Lucy, "and she is encouraged in her naughtiness. I am perfectly wretched."

"I do not agree with Lucy," said Aldyth, quietly; "Caroline ~~was~~ rude, I allow, but she was provoked."

"Caroline is a forward, impertinent child; she wants whipping," said the young lady's brother, shortly. "And I don't approve of her going alone to see any one—Philip Darwin, or any boy or girl in Campion. I will not have it. What is the use of Miss Barton if not to take care of the girls? Remember, I will have no more of this. When my sisters go out *anywhere* they are not to go alone."

The fiat had gone forth. Lucy began to think she was avenged.

"You will repent of that, Harold," observed Aldyth. "The children have never been used to such restraints, and will not submit to them. They are babies no longer, whatever you and Lucy may think. I approve of Caroline's going to see Philip. It does them both good. And pray what are the children to think if they are told that it is *improper* for them to see each other alone? The very idea is revolting."

"Caroline ought to be at school," said Lucy.

"Of course she ought," assented Harold,

catching at the idea as if it came direct from heaven ; " and she shall go."

" Excuse me, she shall *not* go," replied Aldyth.

" You flatly defy me?" (getting rather white about the lips).

" Upon that matter, certainly. With my consent my sisters shall never be sent to school. You know the reason perfectly well ; and I do not think you are a bad enough man to persist in the idea when you have reminded yourself of everything."

Harold was silent. Lucy looked from him to Aldyth in speechless horror. She was his wife, but she would not have dared to speak to him so.

The truth was Harold knew that Aldyth considered it a sacred duty in itself to *see* her sisters educated, to have them brought up entirely under her own eye, subject to her control, and that she believed their going to school would be simply a cowardly way of getting out of her own duties, and casting aside most sacred responsibilities. In addition to which there was her mother's silent influence at work. To Aldyth she had left her sisters, committing them to her charge, and receiving a solemn promise that her *first* duty should always be claimed by them.

That it was which had made her offer to give

up John Ferriers . . . that it was which now roused her to such direct defiance of Harold. She considered this a vital point, and would defend it as such.

"That is very fine," said he at last, "but if Caroline does not choose to conform to the rules of the household, she must be sent out of it."

Aldyth did not repeat her words. One sentence from her of direct resolve, for or against, had more weight than ten volumes of reiterated vows from an unstable character. It is generally the way in such cases. She had the influence of a calm, wise, moderate nature. In any other matter than that of living apart from him Harold would have yielded to her long ago, for he had respect unto her judgment.

He began to see that his wife and his sisters would never amalgamate. It was, however, only to himself that he confessed it, and only partially and indistinctly, even to himself. He was not going to be hurried and driven into a decision. He said, "I shall think about this."

Then Aldyth played her last card. *She* said, "I hope you will think to some purpose. There must be an end to all this one way or the other. You must decide upon something. I have already told you what I judge to be the best."

Silence met this remark. Harold knew per-

fectly well what she meant, but he was not yet prepared to act with her.

He went out of the room, and presently Lucy said, in her foolish, inconsequent manner, "I'm sure I really don't know why Caroline should not go to school. The house would be much pleasanter without her."

"I dare say it would—to you," answered Aldyth. "But I assure you you need not counsel Harold to that, for she shall not go. I shall not allow it."

"You?"

"Yes, I. But if you have any influence with Harold, you may use it in quite a different manner, and with much better results; by advising him to do as I wish, let us go and live at the Dower House. You will then be quite free from disagreeable companions."

"Do you mean to say that Harold *objects*?"

"Very strongly."

"How foolish of him," said Lucy, very seriously, at which the contemptuous smile which had long been hovering upon Esther's lips broke over her face. Lucy would play their game with a will.

CHAPTER IV.

HAROLD IS BROUGHT VERY LOW.

ECILY FERRIERS stayed all night at Follyfoot, and the next day her father rode over to take her back, leading the little pony that was to carry her home.

He was brought into the drawing-room just before lunch. Not having yet called upon Mrs. Harold, he made this the occasion for a visit.

Lucy had seen him once before, on which occasion he had not taken the slightest notice of her. Now Aldyth introduced them to each other, and he bowed profoundly, and began to converse with Lucy in a manner that frightened the little courage she had entirely away.

She could not tell whether he was laughing at her or not when he spoke of her husband as "that great favourite of mine," and thanked her for her great amiability in inviting his little girl

to come there. Also, when he spoke of "that forward young lady, Miss Caroline," with a face of the most profound gravity, she was puzzled as to what he could mean.

He said he should very much like to see Harold, upon which Lucy did manage to stammer out a request that he would stay lunch, which was instantly accepted, with such *empressement* as quite to overpower Lucy.

Caroline then came in, and went to shake hands with him.

"Well, young lady, how have you been conducting yourself?" he demanded.

"Becomingly."

"Ha? Is that true, Mrs. Sweynson? Could you tell a different tale, eh? My young friend is boastful, I think; and much as I esteem her, I must venture to reprove such a glaring fault."

"Oh, she behaves very well, indeed," said Lucy, fluttered out of all presence of mind, and sense, by his keen, glancing eyes.

Caroline turned away carelessly, a smile curling her lips. *She* was not afraid of this terrible old gentleman.

After this episode he confined his conversation to Esther, who was very fond of him, till lunch-time, when he offered his arm to Lucy,

with great and old-fashioned politeness. She hardly knew whether she walked on her head or her heels; her only conscious bit of independent thought being that she wished old Mr. Ferriers at the bottom of the sea, a hundred miles away.

Often, perhaps most frequently, powerful and large natures are held down and retarded by weak and insignificant ones, but sometimes it happens that the strong makes great havoc with the weak, shattering all its complacency, scattering its little self-approving, purring ways to the wind of heaven, and as it were reducing it to a state of paralysis.

Before they had been many minutes at lunch, Harold came in. He had a clouded face, for he was annoyed and angry to find all his calculations upset by three girls. Therein lay the sting. They were girls, and they had the power of impeding and circumventing *him*.

When, however, he saw Mr. Ferriers, he cleared up a little, and there dawned upon his mind the possibility of taking counsel with him in his difficulty. Harold was indeed brought low when he began to admit that the assistance of a second person was in any way requisite in the regulation of his life or actions.

"You are just the man I wanted to see, sir,"

said he, on hearing which Mr. Ferriers refrained from saying that he had come in consequence of Aldyth's visit to him yesterday, and that his sole reason for being there was to give Harold good advice.

He answered, "It is fortunate that I came. I don't often see you up at Croft Head."

"I assure you, I have a great deal of business on hand just now."

"I can quite believe it; you seem to be draining the Lower Close?"

"Yes, I am. If you would walk down there with me after lunch, I should feel much obliged. I should like to show you something I am having done."

To this, Mr. Ferriers gave a polite assent, and Aldyth knew that they would discuss the last great quarrel, and no drainage or tillage at all.

After lunch the gentlemen betook themselves out of doors, and Mr. Ferriers afterwards told Aldyth what they had said.

After a very scanty meed of attention to the workmen, they turned aside, entered the grounds again, and paced slowly up and down the large terrace.

"I told you I wanted to see you," began Harold, "and I will tell you the reason. The girls and my wife . . ."

Here he paused. It was a very deep humiliation to have to confess that "the girls and my wife" quarrelled, so Mr. Ferriers helped him out of it by saying, "Don't quite hit it off, I dare say. That's very likely."

This was putting it in a new light to Harold. Till now it had seemed to him something utterly unprecedented, out of the order of nature, that there should be disturbances in his house. He would have piously endorsed the words of the moral songster,

"Whatever brawls disturb the street,
Let there be peace at home," &c.

But a faint ray of comfort was visible when an old man like Mr. Ferriers said, without any surprise in his voice, "That's very likely."

Harold took heart of grace, and went on,

"Well, to tell the truth, sir, they don't. Why, I can't tell. A nicer, sweeter-tempered girl than Lucy never lived." (Mr. Ferriers did not smile.) "Aldyth and Esther *used* to be as nice girls as you would wish to see. They never made any difficulty about doing as I wished, and I was proud of them."

Poor Harold! He had been proud of them as *his* possessions, his property, which did him credit.

"But now," he continued, in a tone as nearly plaintive as any he ever used, "everything is different. They are always sulking and disputing, and 'refusing to interfere,' at least Aldyth is; and Carrie is downright defiant. She is a wild young thing at the best, and yesterday . . ." (here Harold lifted his hat from his head, and let the cooling breeze blow upon his heated brow) "yesterday there was, I don't mind saying it to you, a grand row. My wife said Caroline had defied her, and had been behaving improperly in going to see Philip Darwin on her own account; and Aldyth was more high and mighty than I ever saw her. My wife said Carrie ought to go to school, and I said by Jove she ought, upon which Aldyth flatly said she should *not* go to school. What is a fellow to do?" (Heaving a long and dismal sigh.)

"This is a matter in which, if I do not speak frankly, Harold, I had better not speak at all. Will you hear me if I speak so?"

"By all means; I shall be obliged to you."

"Well . . . you know I am hardly acquainted with Mrs. Sweynson. She is a very pretty and amiable-looking young lady."

He afterwards justified this remark to Aldyth by saying that Lucy *was* very pretty . . . to

those who admired wax dolls, and that the polite way of describing an expressionless face was to call it amiable.

"I am sure," went on this wily old person, "that you and she are admirably suited to each other, but remember you would not like every one to be in love with your wife, and when she was at Follyfoot before, it was on a different footing, especially in relation to Aldyth."

Harold fired up at once.

"She was always a lady, and just as good as they are."

"My dear boy, I don't wish to dispute it for a second ; but don't you see . . . upon my word it is hard to put it . . . the fact is this, when a woman has ruled a house as Aldyth has, and another woman is brought to her place (particularly under such circumstances as these), it *never* does. They never get on. If it is possible to make any arrangement by which they can live without interfering with one another, it ought to be done. Many people, of course, would be *obliged* to put up with circumstances, but your sisters are not. These ladies, you see, have little else to do but criticise each other, and when they don't agree upon things, differences naturally arise."

"Yes," assented Harold. A week ago he

would have added, " But *my* people must pocket their differences, and submit to my superior masculine judgment."

" Then you will allow me to say, Harold, both as your friend, and as joint guardian of your sisters, that the best way I can think of, would be to let your sisters and the governess (that Miss Barton, by-the-by, is a very superior lady, and would do admirably, I should think)—to let them have a separate establishment altogether. But no doubt you will have thought of it before, and I can understand the scruples you may have about it. Still . . . I wish you would consider."

Thus cunningly put, Harold failed to recognize Aldyth's obnoxious request to live apart from him. Mr. Ferriers had made it appear that it would naturally occur to him as a man and a reasoning animal, as distinguished from an illogical woman, but that as a tender brother and considerate guardian, it might probably be repugnant to his *feelings*. The question was, whether was it expedient to allow reason or feeling to get the upper hand? This, in a misty, vague sort of way, dawned upon Harold's mind, and its effect was seen in his next remark.

"There *is* the Dower House," said he, reflectively.

"Certainly. Does any one live there?"

"Only an old man and his wife, who are paid to look after it, for you know there is furniture in it, too" (as if a happy thought had suddenly occurred to him).

"Is there, indeed? Well, don't do anything because I advise it. I can trust to your judgment."

He could, cunning man, now that that same judgment had been so well biassed to one side.

Harold expressed his gratitude.

"I'm sure I'm awfully obliged to you for taking this trouble. I wish to do what is right by my sisters, but I declare I have been fairly baffled since . . ."

"Yes, yes, don't name it, and now I must go and see after my little maiden. It is time we were going home."

They went into the drawing-room, where Mr. Ferriers contrived to whisper to Aldyth before he left,

"I think I have managed that little piece of business of yours, young lady. I have mystified your brother, and I think you may be in the Dower House before six months are out, if you manage properly."

Aldyth pressed his hand, thanking him with a look.

Then he and Cecily rode away to their farmhouse on the mountain side.

CHAPTER V.

CAROLINE TELLS ME SHE HAS "DONE IT."



THE "Dower House" of the Follyfoot estate was an old and not a very large house. By that I mean that it had three parlours and some six or seven bedrooms.

It stood just outside the grounds, that is, supposing you entered at the lodge, and went up the drive, you turned to the right, half-way there, up a kind of paved lane, with trees at one side. This gave on to a country lane leading to sweet meadows and pleasant walks.

Crossing the lane, you beheld a meadow, up which still ran the paved lane, which appeared to end abruptly in a group of trees and bushes and a green gate. But pass that gate, and you found that it was only a deceptive corner which hid from view the old house and its pleasant garden.

It had many histories, or rather the beginnings and the ends of many histories. Dowagers used to come and end their days there; eldest sons had brought their brides; little families had been born and brought up there, till it was time for them to be transferred to the great house; old people had died there, and had been carried thence to the churchyard, in the valley far below; and women, whose hopes, after the manner of women's hopes, had come to nothing, had finished their lives there.

It was a gray house, facing north-west, so that there was little sun upon the front, and you saw more cold blue peaks, fells and ridges, or "riggs," than anything else; but at the south side there was a pleasant sunny lawn, and a path that led through fields and lanes into the Follyfoot woods, and from thence to the Boundary brook.

If the house had ever had any independent title of its own, it had been long forgotten, and merged into simply "The Dower House," by which it was always known. It stood upon higher ground than either Follyfoot or Hoarstones, and from one or two of the gable windows in the higher stories, peeps of the sea might be had.

The furniture was like the house, quaint and

ancient, with a few modern exceptions, which helped to give the place that attractive and bizarre beauty which for me it always had. Its aspect of depression arose from the want of living occupants other than the old man and woman who at present lived in the "kitchen end" of the house, and who had been there for several years.

Hither, one afternoon towards the end of May, came Harold and Aldyth, knocking at the rarely-opened front door, and looking with critical eyes upon the wilderness of garden and the uncut lawn.

They made a progress all through the house, Harold pooh-poohing some things, and condescendingly remarking of others that "those might do," with repair, ordered fires to be lighted in every room, and informed old John Brockbank and his "missis" that they would have to make up their minds to a cottage. This, on further information, it was found, would not break their hearts. Mrs. Brockbank was a timorous old person, and was "sorely fleyed" at being left in so unprotected a state in a great lonesome place like the Dower House, her husband not counting, apparently, in her list of defensive weapons.

"I shall send the gardener up here, too,"

observed Harold, when they stood outside the door again.

"Yes," said Aldyth, looking round upon the waste of garden, "it would be as well. There are some nice plants here, though, if they were properly looked after. I must speak to Boyd about being careful."

Then they walked down the hill again to Follyfoot.

From this you will justly conclude that Harold had come to see the expediency of yielding upon the subject of separation. He gave way under protest still, however, telling Aldyth that he disapproved of it, and adding,

"You will be bored to death up there, you know. It's quiet enough at Follyfoot, but you will see still fewer people if you go to the Dower House."

"I know that," replied Aldyth, resignedly, "and I am prepared for it."

They were to go there early in June, before Bob came home for his holidays.

I heard of all these arrangements from Caroline one afternoon when we had a reading at Hoarstones.

"Philip," said she to me in a cautious undertone, "the game's won. Did not I tell you I would never rest till I had got what I wanted?"

"*You ?*" (rather slightly).

"Yes, I. It is really through me that we are going to the Dower House. That afternoon I came to see you . . . you remember ?"

I nodded.

"Well, didn't I *just* get into a row after I got back? Lucy was raving mad, and I wouldn't do a thing she wanted. Aldyth actually had a downright quarrel with her—the first real one—and they appealed to Harold. Aldyth forbade me to come into the drawing-room after dinner, because she said they had business to discuss, as if I did not know what it was. I was dancing a jig in the school-room all the time, out of pure joy, to think that I had set them by the ears at last."

"Then you really are going to the Dower House ?"

"Of course we are, in three weeks. 'Callooh! Callay!'"

"That sounds lucid. What may it mean ?"

"Bless you, haven't you read '*Jabberwocky*' yet? Your education *must* be defective."

"If you are the result of a good education, mine has certainly fallen short," said I, blandly.

"You know old Miss Besley?" said Caroline, with one of her rapid, inexplicable darts from one subject to another, apparently utterly irrelevant.

"I know her, yes, and I respect her. She is a friend of mine, so none of your chaff."

"Chaff, no. She is the dearest old thing, so innocent! I went there the other day with a message from Aldyth, and she offered me cake and wine; the cake was seed-cake, and the wine was primrose wine, or cowslip, something equally powerful, at any rate."

"Of course you took it. Don't abuse people's hospitality when you have partaken of it."

"Not I" (indignantly). "Do you suppose I would drink *that* stuff, like Sandford and Merton, or some of those horrid goody children in books? I declined both, so she said she had never known any one refuse it before, except some boy that she once knew, who came to tea, and only ate a bit of bread-and-butter, and drank half a cup of tea, when he might have had jam and buns, and goodness knows what. Well, *that boy turned out an infidel*," concluded Caroline, impressively.

"Did she prophesy the same for you?" I asked, shaken with laughter.

"No. I think she fancied I refused to seem ladylike, or simply because I wasn't a boy, which shows how disgustingly greedy boys must be, don't it?"

"Certainly. But allow me to ask whether

there was any point in your question as to whether I knew Miss Besley?"

"Oh, yes, a very sharp one. She gave me a message a mile long, back to Aldyth, of which I knew I could not remember a word, but I wanted to be off, so I said, 'All serene, Miss Besley;' and would you believe it, she looked at me over her spectacles, and said mildly, 'My dear, what a beautiful expression.' I am sure I went purple."

"It must have been 'rote sarkastick,'" said I, meditatively.

"Not a bit of it; as serious as you or I."

"And *we* are the Anatomy of Melancholy on a small scale."

"I'll tell you another," said Caroline, obligingly.

"No, don't. Spare me! You make me nervous. Please don't."

"Only one, just one small dose. Here goes! Yesterday I went with Aldyth to the Dower House to see about something. There is an old woman there, Mary Brockbank. She told us she had a nephew, and he was very clever. I said, 'Indeed, in what way?' Just then I saw on the floor in a corner of the kitchen a lot of pot images, or clay, I don't know what they

were. I said, 'What are these? Where did you get them?'

"Take your time, dear child," I suggested, considerably.

"Nay, I'm talking against time, for I see Miss Barton putting her spectacles in the case. Well, Mrs. Brockbank said, 'Them's what he does.' (They looked like little fat men.) 'He's always a-baking of them. Last night he'd th' oven fair full o' Bailie Nicol Jarvies. He does a score or so at once.' I exploded, and rushed away, and positively Aldyth said afterwards she didn't see what there was to laugh at in it."

"Some people are so easily amused," said I, loftily.

"They are indeed," answered my tormentor. "I always think of that when I have been here for an afternoon."

Then they took their leave, and left me to relate as much as I chose of what had happened, to Lifton.

I was more relieved than I knew myself, to see Caroline once more in her old mood, scoffing and indifferent though that mood might be to all that was tender, deep, and great in life and life's lessons. It was better than that state of hard enmity, which had almost frightened me sometimes, and so had her bitter, sneering

thrusts at Lucy, and the dogged obstinacy with which she set herself to unsettle the whole household, and succeeded in her purpose.

Perhaps they would all be happier under this new arrangement. I now longed to see Aldyth. I had not looked upon the face I loved so well, since Harold's marriage. I wondered whether she had changed with her surroundings.

CHAPTER VI.

“IT CHANCED ONE DAY.”



IN a month after they had gone to the Dower House, they had settled down there, and it seemed the natural state of things that they should be there rather than at Follyfoot. All the anxieties and cares and mortifications seemed suddenly to have slipped away, and they to be enclosed within a little space with a high wall of solitude and calm on every side.

Many things had happened in the last few months ; so it seemed to them, and yet it was not quite seven months since Lifton and I had come to Hoarstones. These months seemed years.

The desired end, when once permission was accorded, was rapidly attained. Before Robert came home for his Midsummer holidays, his sisters and Miss Barton were in their new home.

That was to them a great event, a date in their lives, from which they long afterwards reckoned events. To Aldyth it was yet more than an event ; it was a sign that she and Harold had failed to act in concert ; that their wills and their principles had clashed openly ; that their sisters were conscious of it, and could no more look upon her and him as equally wise and equally good.

She had conquered, but the bitterness remained, perhaps none the less bitter in that she felt herself to have been right and him wrong.

The shadow of sadness that had always been upon her face since I knew her deepened. I believe that at that time she often tormented herself with questions as to whether, after all, she had done right. She could not be at rest. Her responsibilities weighed heavily upon her. She was not yet two and twenty, and she had the cares of a matron ; which cares were never for a moment absent from her mind. She was very utterly and very drearily alone. Of all her sisters, it was Caroline whom she most anxiously watched, and, I believe, most dearly loved. Often, I know, she tried to rouse in her some feeling of awe or reverence for *something*, no matter what ; tried to teach her that the highest nature is more prone to worship than to scoff.

It seemed as if her efforts were in vain ; Caroline only smiled, and told Aldyth that she had in her the makings of a fine Primitive Methodist preacher. Bright, cold, cutting as fine steel, Caroline stood apart from her sisters, and from all the world, except (as it seemed) Bob, whose little finger she held in more fear and respect than all Aldyth's virtues twenty times perfected.

We went to call upon them at the Dower House, Lifton and I. It was one afternoon, at the very end of June, that we went. The old-fashioned garden had been trimmed and brought to order, and the grass had been cut and rolled. The drawing-room window was open, and some one was playing "Auld Robin Gray," with variations, on the piano. The long, wailing notes fell upon our ears as we waited for the opening of the door, and gave the needful touch of sadness to the joyful peace of the little scene.

When we entered the drawing-room it was Caroline who rose from the piano and said,

"Ah! I thought you would come this afternoon. Providence generally provides."

"In what way do we represent Providence?" asked my brother.

"Well, I was practising that touching air, 'Auld Robin Gray,' and I was just thinking

that if *some one* did not come I should go cracked. So you see you represent an interposition of Providence."

"I see you are an interpreter of dark and obscure sayings."

Here the door was opened, and Aldyth came in. As I have said, I had not seen her since Harold's marriage, and now I looked at her eagerly, curiously.

Yes, to me who loved her face so, there was a subtle change, a settling down about the lips, longer lines at the corners of the mouth, less of that spring and elasticity about her movements, which indeed we only see in people without care. It was Aldyth, but Aldyth older and sadder.

She greeted us with the greatest kindness, passed her hand half-caressingly over my cheek, and then, seeing my glance and flush of intense pleasure, she smiled her old genial smile. I was satisfied. She was at any rate the same to *me*, and in my selfishness that was all I then cared for.

Before we left, I unfolded a plan which had been concocting for some time in my mind, and of which I had not yet spoken to any one. Lif-ton listened to me with much gravity, and Aldyth lent an indulgent ear.

I wanted them to let us go to the Blue Bay with lunch some day; the Sweynsons, Miss Barton, Lifton, and I. The members of the party who were of an enterprising turn of mind, to walk on to see a local lion called the "Rocking-stone," the others to take their ease in a shady cove under the cliffs.

Aldyth assented, and we began to talk about a day for the expedition; but Caroline, who had been listening in profound silence, and who was also apparently thinking deeply upon some subject, said,

"Let us wait till Bob comes home. I know he wants to go to the Rocking-stone. He and I talked about it at Christmas. He will be here the day after to-morrow."

We acquiesced in this sisterly forethought, and having decided that the day should be fixed at our next reading, Lifton and I took our departure. We had not seen Esther that afternoon. She was at the Vicarage, having a Latin lesson, and would not be in till nearly dinner-time.

* * * * *

On the appointed day Bob came home; the reading came off, and the day was fixed for our picnic to the Blue Bay. It was to be on Wednesday, the day but one after the reading. We

were to meet at the Boundary, and all go on together, some walking, some driving, in turns, or, as Caroline elegantly expressed it, "turn and turn about."

Some of us will never forget that day, with its golden sunshine and gentle south-west wind.

I think, when we set out, none of us thought it would be anything more than a pleasant day of lounging on the beach, with a few lazy, and probably bad, attempts at witticism as the spirit moved us, upon any topic under the sun. Yet, before that day was over, there were two who knew each other's hearts—knew for true that at which they had only dared to guess before. And to think it should all have come about by means of that gray old Rocking-stone, which had stood hundreds, thousands of years, without doing any mischief of this kind. Hold! I am going on too fast here.

There was a road over the cliffs by which we could get immediately over the Blue Bay, as we called it—what its real name was I do not know—because of its azure tint. Sometimes it was nearly as blue as a bit of Lake Geneva. Besides which the sea never came wholly up to the cliffs so as to drive one away. And there was a lovely view upon fine days of the two blue

peaks of Mona, hanging like a cloud upon the horizon.

We made a kind of bivouac upon the sands, under the shadow of a great cliff. We had brought rugs and shawls and some of us sat or lay down in lazy enjoyment, while the others walked or strolled about. Caroline and Robert kept apart. They were talking together very low, and very seriously. Little, little did any of us think what projects were then being agitated in their minds!

Aldyth and I were somewhat apart from the others, seated close together.

"How seldom I see you now, Aldyth," said I, watching her quickly-moving fingers. She was knitting. It seemed to me that she was everlastingly knitting.

"Yes, I have hardly fulfilled my duty as I should have done, have I?"

"In what way have you failed?"

"I think I agreed to be your mother, or confessor, or something, did not I?"

"Oh, you need not remind *me* of it; but I thought you might have forgotten. You have had so many more important things to think about."

"I never forget, Philip, and I have not forgotten that. But you do not need me so much

now. You look twice as happy as when you first came."

"I am ; but not happy enough to do without you. All this winter and spring that has passed seems like a dream—a dream always growing brighter and lighter. I wish I could never awake from it."

"What does that mean?"

"It will not always be like this, you know. That horrid thing, Change, will be sure to come and interfere, when everything is at its brightest and best, and then the dream is over."

"Change? Yes, I hope there will come a change some time," said Aldyth, looking with dreaming eyes across the water.

"That John Ferriers again!" I commented to myself. "Bother the fellow!" and I said to her, "Oh, I see you are weary of this quietness. You long for something else."

"I am waiting," she answered, unconsciously I verily believe.

"Waiting . . . for what? for whom?" I demanded, both jealously and impertinently.

Aldyth started, her face flushed with a beautiful deep colour. She returned to herself again, saying,

"I am talking nonsense. Forget what I said, Philip."

In my hand was the book I had brought down to read, George Sand's "*Marquis de Villemer*," and as I looked at the open page, my eye fell upon these words : "*Ou allait donc, Mademoiselle de Saint Geneix, en pleine nuit, et en pleine montagne, dans un pays perdu ?*" I had thought, in reading the words before, that they were among the most beautiful and melancholy ones I had ever seen, and now I somehow connected them with Aldyth. Where was she going ? What was she waiting for "*dans un pays perdu ?*"—a lost land of the vaguest hope and conjecture ?

I sighed, reading the words again, hoping that the answer—a good answer—would be given in time.

Aldyth saw me staring at my book, and thought I was reading.

"What have you got there ?" said she. "Oh, a French novel. I never read one."

"Lifton and I brought a good deal of trash with us from the Continent," I answered, carelessly, shutting up the book, but not succeeding in driving from my mind those melancholy words. Like a chant, they sounded in my ears all day . . . "*En pleine nuit, et en pleine montagne, dans un pays perdu ?*"

"Lunch is ready!" announced Caroline,

coming up to us. "Esther and Mr. Darwin have been making the salad. My disinterested advice to you all is, leave them to eat it."

"Why?"

"Because they took no notice of me when I ventured to correct their extremely vague ideas as to the quantity of stuff they ought to put in it. There is any amount of oil. I hope you like oil. I don't; so I saved a lettuce to make myself a private and particular salad."

We said we thought we should be reckless enough to venture upon the dangerous compound, and having so decided, we went to lunch, which was spread out upon some rocks.

"After lunch," said Esther, "I am going to see the Rocking-stone. I have heard of it from my earliest infancy, but I have never yet seen it, and if I don't to-day, I shall begin to think it is a myth."

"The point of the thing is, to make it rock backwards and forwards," observed Aldyth.

"It is," said Caroline, with a peculiarly sententious intonation.

"And up and down and sideways, too, if you can" (from Robert, who gave a look at Caroline).

"And o . . ." she began, but he shook his

fist at her, and said, "Shut up, old girl," which she did.

"I shall certainly go and see it, too," observed Lifton.

"I hope you will," retorted Caroline, with a rather grim laugh.

Long before we sober elders had finished lunch, Caroline and Robert had disappeared . . . whither, they alone knew, and the spirits that moved them to mischief.

Though Esther had been the person to bring the Rocking-stone motion forward, yet she did not offer to move when lunch was over, but sat still, her face almost hidden under her broad hat, and her sunshade elevated. There was always a trifle of mystery about her; a shadow, an expression in her face, whose meaning, try as you would, you could never catch. Continually you believed you had found the key to it; as continually you found yourself baffled and deceived.

I waited, expecting that Lifton would speak, and urge some one to go, but he, too, maintained silence, and it was Aldyth who, with a suddenly awakened expression, said,

"Well, is no one going to see the Rocking-stone? The afternoon is getting on, and it is the only lion in these parts."

"Are not you coming?" asked Lifton, turning to her.

"No, thanks; I have been before. The way is a steep and narrow one, and I feel too lazy for climbing. I shall stay with Philip."

"Miss Barton would like to go?" suggested he, with a hypocritical expression of the deepest interest.

"Yes, Miss Barton would like to go," answered that lady, "but she is getting into years, and has no fancy for climbing precipices."

"Esther" (as if she were the last person he would have thought of, if any one else would have gone), "will you take pity upon me and come? If you won't I shall be found seated upon the Rocking-stone, weeping that I am alone in the world."

Esther smiled.

"Yes, I will come," said she. "It has been my firm intention to go to-day, and I think we shall find Bob and Carrie somewhere in that neighbourhood."

He was standing up, close beside her, and he put out his hand to help her up. She just touched it with hers as she rose, nothing more.

Then, saying they would come back to us there, they departed.

"How graceful Esther is!" said I, following her with my eyes.

"So is your brother," replied Aldyth. "I do not know any one who carries himself with so much ease and dignity as he does."

"Take care; I tell him everything."

Aldyth smiled.

"You are welcome to tell him," said she; "I shall not care."

"That Ferriers again," thought I, disgustedly.

* * * * *

Lifton and Esther walked slowly along the sands towards the rocky path, leading to the Rocking-stone, or rather to the cave in the cliff wherein it stood.

"The others are intensely lazy," said Lifton, in a voice of virtuous complacency.

"Miss Barton likes a town. She has no soul for country walks, or getting up to see the sun rise, or anything of that kind. I often think she must be really fond of us, to stay in this place, for I have heard her call it semi-barbarous."

"Then I like semi-barbarism" (laughing), "but is it true that you have never been out of England, Esther?"

"Quite true. Aldyth has only been abroad once. She went with papa and mamma a long

time ago. Once I went to London, when I was a little girl. I don't remember much about it. I feel as if I must seem very ignorant, and very stupid, to people who have seen much. As soon as the conversation gets out of England I have to stop. I can only listen, and wish I had been at all these places."

"Sometimes," said he, gravely, "such limited knowledge is to be preferred to a wider range of information. But, stop, is not that the path?"

"Yes, there it is; and now I shall have to trust to my instinct to find the cave. I fancy one has to turn to the right to get at it, when we reach the top of the steps."

Lifton went on first, turning now and then to offer her his hand when they came to any unusually steep and difficult bit. She seldom took it; but once, when she nearly stumbled over a loose stone, she put out her own and caught at his supporting arm. They entered the cave without having come upon any traces of Robert and Caroline, and Esther said she wondered where they were.

It was always called a cave, the aperture in which the Rocking-stone stood, but it was open at the top, and the stone rose a little above the surrounding wall of rocks. Any one standing on

the cliff above might push the stone to and fro with ease.

"There it is," said Esther, "and now let us sit down for a minute; I am tired."

She seated herself upon the top step of the rocky staircase up which they had climbed. She was just under the stone, and could touch its side with her hand.

"Suppose it were to come down!" said she.

"It is perfectly balanced," he answered, examining the curious old moss-covered thing with some interest. "Though I once heard of some people—a party of young men—who, out of mischief, pushed a similar stone from its pedestal; it was in another county—Cornwall, I think."

"Would it be easy to push this over?"

"I dare say I could do it. This is a small one, but . . ." (looking critically at it) "quite big enough to kill any one it fell upon."

After expressing this opinion, he seated himself by her side, and asked,

"You like living at the Dower House, don't you?"

"For some things, yes. We may do as we choose there, and have peace, which, I suppose, is the great thing."

"Yet you must have felt very much leaving Follyfoot?"

"I don't know that I did. Sometimes one gets into a state of not caring very much for any one or anything."

"Yes; 'life's a blank; existence desolation' to the cynic," said he, with a mischievous laugh.

"Cynic!—no, I am not a cynic. I leave that to Carrie."

"Well, do you mean to say that you were in that exquisitely wretched state that you cared for nothing and nobody?"

"It is so long ago. I don't keep a diary. I forget my feelings of to-day by to-morrow at noon; and as for explaining them——"

"I dare say you cannot."

"You think I have none *to* explain?"

"I did not say so. According to what I heard the other day, you should have plenty of feeling."

"Why?"

"Because you are a woman. I heard Miss Weston and a gentleman talking. They said woman was all feeling; feeling stood to her in the place of reason, and accordingly the extra privileges she asked for might reasonably be denied to her, since only feeling prompted her to demand them. I wish you would think it over, and tell me whether you *feel* that to be reasonable."

"What a 'tangled thread' of words!"

"You have had no readings lately," went on Lifton. "It seems an age since you were at Hoarstones. The place is quite unfamiliar to me."

"What nonsense! Your own home unfamiliar because two or three people have missed coming once or twice for the last few weeks."

"How you snap at me to-day!" he said, with deprecating mildness. "I hardly dare speak to you, and sometimes you are so different. I do think you are the most fitful, unreliable person (in temper) I ever knew."

"Do you, indeed?" said Esther, haughtily, staring him full in the face, which was what he (he always was an unscrupulous person) had intended she should do.

"There was not the least necessity for you to say so," continued Esther, stiffly.

He laughed, and clasped his hands round one knee.

"What have I done *now*? You look savage, do you know, and . . ."

Esther laughed, too, constrainedly.

"How utterly ridiculous!" said she, "quarrelling in a cave. And our voices echo so! How absurd we should look if any one came here!"

"We need not quarrel even if we *are* in a cave—

" ' But children, you should never let
Your angry passions rise ;
Your little hands . . . '

I forget the rest, but you will take the will for the deed. I humbly apologize."

"For what?"

"That you know better than I. I hardly dare venture to ask. I don't know what harm I have done, but I thought an apology might turn away your just displeasure, for I am sure it *is* just."

Esther frowned and said,

"I am not a baby, to be laughed at . . ."

"Indeed, *indeed* I am not laughing, Esther. Upon my honour I was only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Won't you give this stone a push, just to make it swing about a little before we go?"

She looked at him. Nothing to be learnt from those eyes. Her face took an expression of coldness; she was hurt, offended, and he knew it.

She said nothing, but placed her little ungloved hand upon the stone, and pushed it; it moved and oscillated gently.

"Hulloa, Carrie!" shouted a voice from above, "some one's been pushing it already."

"So much the better!" responded well-known tones.

A slight scuffling and the trampling of feet was now heard above, but the actors in this dark deed were hidden, by reason of the stone, from Lifton and Esther, who listened with attention and amusement, not having the faintest conception of the large and magnificent design which had long been at work in the brains of the two conspirators, and which was now to be put into execution.

"Go it!" said the voice of Robert, as he gave the stone a mighty push, making it rock to and fro with dangerous force.

Esther was tempted to start forward and bid them be careful, but Lifton, with a touch on her arm, restrained her; his intention was to reveal himself suddenly, and effect the discomfiture of Caroline and Robert.

Another push; another, and another; the boulder rocked and swayed. All in a moment it occurred both to Lifton and Esther that it was going to fall.

With sudden terror, Esther tried to start aside, but the stone was actually falling. She did not shriek nor make any noise; she seized

Lifton's arm and clung to it, looking with a pale face and frightened eyes at the fall of the monster. The space was very narrow; it seemed as if the stone *must* come upon her. She felt, almost without knowing it, that his arm was passed round her, and that she was drawn as close to him and to the rocky side of the cave as he could draw her.

The stone fell, passing her, grazing her garments, as nearly upon her as was possible. It went with a crash down the cliff, upon the sharp rocks below.

Though the danger was over, they scarcely breathed yet, or believed themselves safe. She looked at Lifton, and saw a face as white as her own, eyes that devoured hers, as if to assure themselves that she was not dead outright. Dizzy and stunned from the shock and its reaction, she stood motionless in his clasp, until she met his eyes, and said, with a long, faint sigh,

"Oh . . . Lifton!"

"Esther . . . Esther!"

He bent his face to hers, and kissed her pale lips gently, murmuring some other inaudible words. Then, trembling, she moved aside from him, and they stood silent.

He saw that to say more at that moment

would be cruelty. She sat down, pale and unnerved, upon the steps up which they had laughingly climbed.

"You must come down from here," said he, tenderly, at last. "Do you think you can walk to the place where we had lunch?"

"In a few minutes. I don't want to frighten Aldyth."

"Those wretched children!" observed Lifton next.

Esther smiled faintly.

"It was very wrong of them. No one but Carrie and Bob would have done it."

"The stone is smashed in two pieces," said Lifton, looking down.

"Then we must keep counsel."

"Here it is, Carrie! Oh, my stars, just look! split in half as neat as can be!"

So Master Robert, who had eyes only for the mischief he had done, at which he gazed rejoicingly.

But Caroline's needle-like eyes went farther up. She saw there were witnesses. They had run down the cliff when the stone fell, and now entered the cave to view the extent of the damage they had done.

"*Esther!*" remarked Caroline, with a trifle less presence of mind than usual.

Esther did not answer, and Lifton, speaking with some difficulty in a stern tone, said,

"Perhaps you would have been satisfied if you had killed your sister as well as doing that other mischief?"

"Killed my sister!" gasped the young lady, quite at a loss.

"That stone only missed her by a hair's breadth. It brushed her dress as it fell."

"Oh, she isn't really hurt then?" said Caroline, in some indignation at having been pulled up for nothing. "I thought she must be half crushed to death. I'm sorry you happened to be there, because Bob and I wanted to keep it a secret. But you need not say anything, you know."

"That will entirely depend upon the manner in which you conduct yourself," replied Lifton, eying her severely. "You had better go now. Don't alarm Miss Sweynson. I'll bring Esther when she is sufficiently recovered."

Caroline's look on hearing this mandate and its final clause, was worth seeing. She looked at Lifton rebelliously, as if she would very much like to defy him by remaining where she was, but the steady eye and voice of authority had some influence even over her, and then, too, she had put herself in the wrong, so, with some

words of muttered grumbling, she departed, and Bob, after looking from the shattered stone to his silent sister, and from his sister to the stone again, ventured to meet Lifton's eyes. Caroline was gone, and Lifton's face relaxed as he looked upon Robert.

"I say, Mr. Darwin, you won't tell, will you?"

"If you'll promise never to be such a fool again."

"Not if I know it," said Bob, unconsciously bursting forth into epigram. Then he, too, went his way.

They were again left alone, and scarcely had Robert gone, than Esther rose and said she could walk; she was all right, and they had better go.

"And my apology, Esther is it accepted?"

"I do not know what it was for," she answered, with a trembling lip, and looking straight before her.

"For nothing. I was teasing you, that was all. If it is unpardonable . . ."

"I never said so. It was very unkind, not unpardonable, and is forgiven."

Then, with a magnanimous air, Esther walked down the steps, and Lifton felt that he had had

the worst of it. He felt, too, as he afterwards told me, that he had deserved his fate.

* * * * *

"Here they come!" said Aldyth, referring to Robert and Caroline, who, arm-in-arm, came up to us. I beheld a look of uneasy quiet upon Robert's face, and it struck me that Caroline had something more weighty than usual on her mind.

"Where have you been?" asked Aldyth.

"Oh, only larking about the cliffs," replied Caroline, carelessly, while Robert walked off and began to make ducks and drakes with flat, water-worn pebbles.

Caroline, after a glance round, and an impenetrable look at me, sat down close beside me, and began to talk rapidly about the pony that was in Aldyth's phaeton, and to give me a history of all the ponies they had ever had, which recitation my ears received and my head ignored. I was wondering where Esther and Lifton were, and what they were doing. Presently I perceived them approaching, and I saw that as they came in sight, Esther withdrew her arm from my brother's, also that they both walked slowly, she as if she were tired.

When they came up to us, Aldyth instantly

exclaimed upon Esther's pallor and look of weariness, and wanted to know what had happened.

"Nothing much," said Lifton, almost indifferently. "Your sister is not the best of walkers, and I think she was too tired to go to such a difficult place. She slipped and nearly fell. The edge of the cliff was very near, and I think she was frightened."

I looked at Lifton as he made this explanation, and as I looked I disbelieved every word. There was something forced and unreal in his manner, which Aldyth did not notice, because she was distressed at Esther's fatigue, but I saw it directly. Why, too, should Esther's pale cheeks turn so deep a crimson at the memory of a slip of the foot? Moreover, I saw that Caroline listened with the deepest attention to Lifton, and when he had finished speaking, she looked inquiringly towards him. He in his turn looked at her, and gave the slightest of nods, after which Caroline, turning to me, went on,

"And so this pony, which we called the Stumper, because he used to peg along so . . ."

"Your deeply interesting narrative must come to a close, Carrie," said Aldyth. "It is

time for us to go home, if we wish to be in time for dinner."

Dear Aldyth! She believed every word they had all said, and was excessively concerned about Esther, wondering if she had sprained her ankle, or in any way injured herself.

As for me, I determined to have a little conversation with Lifton when we arrived at home, hoping that by that means I should find out what had been going on.

And so, half of us cheated, the other half cheating, we took our way home. It was the last, the very last time we all met in that way. We never again met without the consciousness of deeper things that lay behind our words. Already Lifton and Esther had the memory of a kiss between them, and they walked along, silent, abstracted, and apart. I was not all-wise then any more than I am now, and I thought they had quarrelled.

When we parted, we assured each other that we had had a most delightful day. We separated, Bob to go to Follyfoot, the Sweynson girls and Miss Barton to the Dower House, Lifton, Stephen and I to Hoarstones.

CHAPTER VII.

“WILL YOU THINK OF ME?”



WE had been seven months at Hoarstones, and they had been, to me, despite their quiet monotony of tone and circumstances, the happiest months of my life. That, I suppose, endorses the truth of Caroline's remark, that I must have a very hum-drum, commonplace sort of mind, for which I am sorry, because a fine mind is a grand thing, and I can only say in apology that I would have a superior one if I could, and my want is my misfortune, not my fault.

Two days after our expedition to the Blue Bay, Lifton and I were in the wood near the Boundary Brook; the day was hot, still, and sultry, and it was, I well remember, the 6th of July. We had a rug spread out upon the grass, and the trees made a tent above. We were in a very luxurious state, both of mind and body,

lazy throughout. No mental condition is so enjoyable as that in which the mind is in a state of utter and entire quiescence, unswayed this way or that. I have found it from long experience to be "that state of life" most calculated to afford satisfaction and the fulness of content . . . to myself.

Before attaining to this sublimely elevated state of abstraction, I had been greatly exercised in my mind with regard to Lifton and his secretiveness, a new quality of which I had lately discovered him to be possessed. Whether it should go to swell the list of his good or evil dispositions, I had not yet decided. So far I had found it rather provoking. I had treated him to a good many hints that I should like to know something of his feelings towards Esther Sweynson, all of which hints had been met with bland but utter unresponsiveness. I looked at him now as he lay upon the rug, his hat tilted over his eyes, his hands clasped under his head, and a cigar between his lips. I wondered what he was thinking of; wondered and wished to know. As I looked earnestly at him, he turned his head lazily towards me, and our eyes met. There are moments in our lives when a very small thing, a glance, a touch, a word, seems to go right down to the deep, seldom-touched

wells of feeling at our very souls. Such a look was this. Lifton had surprised, by an unexpected glance, the secret question of my heart; he read in my face and in my wistful eyes that I felt myself shut out, and was thinking of him and of his concerns.

Some men would have been annoyed, would have thought me pertinacious and intrusive, and would have turned away or said something impatient. Not so Lifton. He smiled, and unclasping his hands, touched mine. His was a pleasant hand to touch, warm, and firm, and trustworthy. I understood the meaning he desired to convey by that touch; that meaning was, that to me he was ever the same, but that I must be content to know that, and not try to learn too much or too soon of other affairs. We did not speak—to please him, I returned his smile, after which he returned to his cigar and sky-contemplation, and I tried to resign myself to his will. Still gazing at him, I thought that even if he did not tell me all his concerns, he was the best brother that ever lived. At this point, and while instances in proof of my thought came crowding into my mind, I began to feel an unpleasant lump in my throat, and to see things—the trees and the brook—as “through a glass, darkly.” These sensations I was striv-

ing to suppress, when the silence was broken . . . a laugh, that peculiarly human sound, and a laugh that I knew well, with its clear, metallic, unsympathetic ring, struck upon our ears, and then came voices, gradually drawing nearer.

"It's Carrie," said I, listening.

"And Esther," remarked my brother, sotto voce, as he placed himself in the upright attitude which marks the superiority of man over the brute.

It was Caroline and Esther, and they stopped when they saw us, and looked at us contemplatively.

Lifton raised his hat, and hoped they had come to stay.

"We are simply going for a little walk," said Caroline. "We could not decide what to do by means of our own unaided intellect, so we tossed up: heads, stay in the house and yawn; tails, put on our strong boots and take a constitutional. Tails won."

"So I should suppose," said Lifton. "Meanwhile, you can come and sit down. There is plenty of room, and I beg to state that this is not fit weather for walking, *especially* in strong boots."

"I fully agree with you, though the strong boots are a figure of speech," said Caroline.

"If Esther likes to go for a walk by herself, she can. I am not going to fly in the face of Providence in such an impious manner."

She sat down upon the rug, close to me, and Esther, after a moment's hesitation, sat down also. Lifton was now standing up, leaning against a tree, and looking as if the heat were too much for him.

"Were you very much tired, Philip, the other day?" asked Esther.

"No. It did me good, thanks; and you?"

"I? Oh, I am all right."

"When shall we four meet again?" said Caroline, tossing up her gloves, and repeating the interesting question some half dozen times, to the cheerful cadence of a Gregorian chant, which she professed to admire.

"What makes you ask? Why shouldn't we meet again?"

"Why, indeed? particularly as one of us is going out to see the wicked world. 'My native land, good-night,' and any other patriotic thing you can think of."

I looked at Esther. There was a conscious look in her face, and she gave one quick glance at Lifton, who in his turn looked at her, saying,

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, I am going away," said she, as if answering to a former question.

"She's going with the Mostyns," continued Caroline in a calm voice, as if she desired to crush us. "Lady Mostyn came yesterday. She says she is ordered to travel for eighteen months or two years, and her husband is going with her. They want to have some one young with them, they say (for that matter I am young, younger than Esther), and they have invited her to *be* that some one young. Of course she has consented."

"Good gracious!" said I. Neither Lifton nor Esther spoke. She was playing with the ribbon knot at the top of her sunshade, and he was looking at her curiously, inquiringly. "And when is she going?" I asked, ignoring the person most concerned, and speaking to Caroline.

"In a fortnight. They are going to Switzerland and Italy and Vienna . . . I don't know where they are *not* going, and I think it is very wrong of Esther not to be quite cracked about it."

"Are we to infer from that, that Esther does not care much about going?" asked Lifton, looking at her.

"Not in the least; only that Carrie is fond

of giving her opinion upon every subject, whether she understands it or not."

"Humph!" said Caroline,

After a few moments spent in silence, Caroline told me that Aldyth had had more letters from John Ferriers and Edmund.

I asked how they were getting on.

"Oh, pretty well, I fancy, but you know Jack said he and Aldyth would be married in a very short time. I don't believe they will. There are plenty of cats now-a-days, but not many Whittingtons."

"You really should write a 'Proverbial Philosophy.'"

"I wonder, Philip, how it is that you and I get on so well. You are *that* romantic and sentimental, you know, while I have not a scrap of it in me."

"Speak for yourself as to our getting on. I never said we did, but I should not think of telling a lady to her face that I did not admire her."

"Particularly when you know you do admire her very much."

Lifton and Esther were pacing slowly about close at hand. They appeared to be talking earnestly. Now and then I caught the sound of their voices, but not their actual words. As usual, I was intently watching them, even while

seeming to listen to Caroline. Afterwards I knew what they had said.

"Is this really true, Esther?"

"That I am going away? Yes, it is true."

"Are you glad?"

"Why not? I should be glad, don't you think so? I have always longed more for this than for anything."

"Have you really? Have you longed for it lately, because you never told me so?"

"I have not thought much about it lately," said she, unguardedly.

Lifton made no spoken comment upon her admission, but after a pause said,

"Suppose that Phil and I had not come home when we did. We should most likely have met you somewhere, for I know the Mostyns well. Sir Henry and my father were friends."

"Why suppose any such thing? I am very glad it is not so."

"Are you? Why?"

"As if one could always explain one's motives. You are very curious, and it is time for us to be going home again, too."

"We shall meet again before you leave?"

"Most likely."

"You will forget Follyfoot and Hoarstones

when you are in all those places which I know you can so well appreciate."

"Forget! That is impossible."

"You will meet lots of new people, nice people, I dare say, far more to your mind than the 'society' of Campion, which, of course, you will learn to despise."

"Your ideas of my morals are not high," said she, in an embarrassed tone.

"Do you mean to say that you will not forget, not despise?"

"Mr. Darwin, I *never* forget or despise old friends. It is not in me to forget. You imagine an impossibility."

"*Old* friends. Ah, I did not mean that!"

"I will say 'friends,' if you like it better."

"And that means . . ."

"Simply what I say, no more."

"May I hope to be considered as one of your friends?"

"Why should I think of you as an enemy?" she asked, half smiling.

"Then you will sometimes think of me in your journeyings . . . as a friend?"

"Certainly, if you wish it. At what hour must I think of you?—

'At morn, at noon, at twilight dim?

or . . . when?"

"If I *wish* it!" said he, with much scorn. "Esther, I shall think of you every day, whether you wish it or not."

Esther made no answer, but walked towards Caroline and me. She did not sit down again, but said to Caroline that they must go home. Caroline rose without offering any opposition, and wished me good-afternoon. Lifton walked for a short distance with them, and then returned to me, and sat down upon the rug without saying anything.

"Think of Esther going off in that way!" said I at last. I longed excessively to know what he thought about it, but I did not dare to ask him.

"H'm!" he answered, in an entirely neutral tone.

Soon afterwards we went into the house again, and that was all the farewell either of us took of Esther Sweynson. She did not come to either of our next readings, and we did not meet her anywhere. Also, she left home two days earlier than had been originally intended. When we heard she had gone, I remember, Lifton did for one moment look blank, and—I can call it nothing else—lost. That one moment sufficed to show me that he had expected to take another parting after that one in the wood.

One day, too, I found in a drawer in the study a scrap of paper, which I recognized as half of a leaf from a certain small note-book, pertaining to one Lifton Darwin. Written on it was a few words in pencil, blurred and smeared, as if they had been rubbed with a finger :

"Two years to wait, most likely, and all because I missed one day! Will she distrust me? . . . I wish I had . . ."

Here the paper was torn. When I had read it, I tore it into tiny little scraps, and wished I had not seen it. I was not happy in the knowledge I had gained since it was not Lifton himself who had told me.

BOOK IV.

CHAPTER I.

HOW TWO YEARS PASSED.



AFTER that two years passed, to us almost without events.

Lifton and I settled down at Hoarstones, and felt that we had at last found our home. During that two years I grew as strong as my lot was ever to allow me to be. Certainly I was less helpless than I had been, and I learned to be thankful for my part in life; thankful that it was no worse than it was; thankful that it was so happy, as in many respects it certainly might be called.

I was at Hoarstones the whole of that time, but Lifton made frequent journeyings to and fro, as well as having friends to stay with him *not* unfrequently. He could not satisfy himself

with "country," pure and simple, and must have his distractions. For me, I had learned to be content.

Enough of ourselves; now for our neighbours, by whom, of course, I mean the Sweynsons, they being our neighbours par excellence. We grew more intimate every day, and were more truly brothers and sisters than many who are so indeed.

To my great pleasure, Lifton and Aldyth had learned to call each other by their names. It came about through Caroline, most of these things did.

One day she had come, with Miss Barton, to read, and Aldyth called for them, coming into the house for a few minutes. Before they left, Lifton asked Caroline some trifling question about Esther, as to where she was, I think.

"Oh, I don't know," said Carrie. "Her letters are so very grand, 'I cannot attain unto them.' You must ask Aldyth."

Upon which Lifton, turning to her, said,

"Aldyth, Carrie says she does not know where her own sister is."

There was a little pause, and then he found out what he had said, laughed, and apologized.

"You need not beg my pardon," answered Aldyth, laughing. "I only keep 'Mr. Darwin'

for the occasions on which I see you, for Harold and this impertinent child" (with a smile at Caroline) "always speak of you as 'Lifton.'"

"Do they? and you too?" he said, much pleased. "Well, if you would drop 'Mr. Darwin,' and forget that I have any other name than Lifton, I would . . . do as much for you any day."

At this there was a great laugh, in which Miss Barton and the rector, who were both there, joined. And after that it was no more "Miss Sweynson" and "Mr. Darwin," but "Aldyth" and "Lifton."

One evening when we were at Follyfoot, with other guests, I remember Caroline came to me and whispered, "Just wait till Lifton speaks to Aldyth, and then watch old Miss Besley's face." Which thing I did, and saw the dear old lady's expression of horror as Lifton, in addressing Aldyth, spoke her Christian name.

"Don't say you haven't enjoyed yourself, you wicked, mischievous boy!" said Caroline, shaking with laughter, and taking herself off.

Some few changes had passed over this family in those two years. Robert had left school and gone to business. His will had carried the day; he was in a warehouse in *Manchester*. Harold's wrath, when he first

heard of the idea, had been dire, but he had been obliged to give in. He thought it very singular that neither of his brothers should have enough gentlemanly feeling to take to the church, the law, or the army, rather than to such 'plebeian pursuits as emigration and trade.

As usual, Aldyth had been the peace-maker, and her common sense had overcome Harold's blind opposition to his low-minded brother.

She had represented that to oppose Robert's earnest wish at so important a crisis of his life, and deliberately throw him into the midst of temptations, with the object of making him study for a profession to which he had the strongest objections, would be simple madness, inasmuch as he was not an idle young man who wanted to do nothing for himself, but one who had thought very earnestly, and chosen deliberately, an honourable career.

Mr. Ferriers had added his counsels to hers, and Harold had seen reason and yielded, but he thought less of Robert ever after.

It was not without much anxiety and many prayers that Aldyth sent her young brother out into the world, but how different the parting from Robert had been to that from Edmund. Bob had given her a hearty kiss, and was not very much ashamed to have a tear seen in his eye.

He had promised to write to her every week, and had kept his promise ; and, what was to Aldyth more than all beside, he had added, " However well I may get on, Aldyth, the best part of it will be owing to you, for being such a good little mother to me."

She felt then that her anxieties and cares had not been wasted.

Time had proved Robert worthy of the trust put in him, and right in his choice of a business. He liked it ; worked hard ; was held in favour by his chiefs ; and, though he did not yet see his way to becoming the " Merchant Prince " of his and Caroline's early dreams, yet he had all the future before him, and boundless confidence in it and in himself.

At the end of that two years, Caroline, now nearly seventeen, had developed into a very beautiful girl, more and more of an enigma to me every day. Slowly and by degrees I was learning that she was not the frank, good-hearted creature I had at first taken her for. Time had not softened her. She could sneer as bitterly, mock as cruelly, satirize her friends as unsparingly as before ; she had that strange gift, a tongue, which she could and did use, and she was a cynic even then. Where that curious *moral obliquity* came from, I cannot imagine,

but there it was. We were still on intimate terms, that is, we never met without having much to say to each other, much about which to contradict each other, much to laugh at, scarcely anything about which to agree.

She attracted me while she repelled me. I could never get accustomed to the contradiction between her blooming, radiant beauty, and her hard, cold, logical clearness of perception and want of sympathy with all that was soft and tender.

Who has said that a woman should not be able to see into character, and read the motives of others? After an hour's conversation with Caroline, I generally thought of the saying, and generally agreed with it.

And Aldyth? Those long months of waiting had left their mark upon her, as how could it be otherwise?

The dream of John Ferriers' speedy return to claim her, and take her back with him, had by this time melted away, and the lightly-spoken, little-understood "few years" had been transformed into a dim and uncertain "some-time." She had his letters; he was faithful; he wrote to her as warmly and hopefully as when he had left. He still hoped; she still believed in him. He and Edmund had had

very fair success, and the latter was perfectly content, but he had not gone out with quite such sanguine expectations as John.

To me, Aldyth only grew more gracious and beautiful. We were firm and fast friends now, and spoke together of many things.

So time passed. At Follyfoot there was a baby, who was the centre of many conflicting emotions. Thus, Harold looked upon his son with mingled fear and complacency. Lucy with the adoring raptures of a weak-minded character. Aldyth lavished untold depths of tenderness upon the child. Its advent had entirely reconciled her to Lucy, and she was, in a protecting, motherly kind of way, really fond of that young person. Caroline looked upon the stranger with a mixture of amusement and contempt, which she did not attempt to disguise. She openly said she disliked and feared babies. She never nursed this one, never kissed it; made a curious grimace when she saw Lucy hanging over it in, what she, Caroline, called "a maternal interval," adding, that she considered the paroxysms as a kind of intermittent insanity, and for the rest, she ignored it.

Emma was a slight, delicate child of eleven. She has little to do with this story. She was

not strong, mentally or bodily, except in her intense love for Aldyth, which love (need I say it?) was as strong on Aldyth's part as hers.

It was at the end of this time that Esther was expected home. They had heard from her constantly, but lately her letters had changed much. Aldyth nearly always showed them to me, and we both agreed as to the subtle, indefinable alteration that had come over them. This had gone on for some four or five months. She always said she was well, always told us she was enjoying herself, spoke with deep affection of Sir Henry and Lady Mostyn, and their kindness; described the things she saw in her own peculiar, quaint, and appreciative style, and yet——

Aldyth was of course looking anxiously forward to seeing her. She had missed her much, and the desire to meet again had become very strong on both sides.

The time of year at which I again take up this history is June. Two winters had passed, and now we were in the midst of the second summer.

CHAPTER II.

DIVIDED.

“O you think you can go ?” said Lifton to me one morning. He referred to an invitation to go to Follyfoot the next evening, after dinner, to meet a few friends.

“Oh, yes, I feel quite strong enough,” I replied. I knew that Aldyth and Esther would be there, and I was determined, if possible, to go.

“Family party, I suppose?” observed my brother, trying to be supercilious.

“Well, I always like their parties,” said I, reflectively. “I don’t care much for the host and hostess, but I do for some of the people who visit them. I suppose” (after a pause) “that Esther will be there, too; she was to come home yesterday, Caroline told us.”

“So she did” (raising his eyebrows as if the

idea were quite new to him). "Then of course she will be there."

I hid my face behind the newspaper to conceal the smile that *would* come to my face.

It was about nine o'clock when we entered the drawing-room at Follyfoot. We were not the first arrivals. The room was lighted up, and seemed to me to be full of people.

Lucy came forward to greet us, with Harold at her side. Lucy had rather improved since her marriage, and particularly since the arrival of her hopeful son.

I, having spoken to my host and hostess, sat down near Aldyth, who was there, and then I looked round the room to see if I could recognize Esther.

That, could that be she, to whom Lifton was speaking? But so changed, that I hardly knew her. She had been pretty when she left, but now she was a beauty. When she went away, her manner, though easy and graceful, had been timid and retiring; now it was finished, self-possessed, and calm. No one could see her now without noticing her. Neither Lifton nor I ever admired the type of young woman that I have often heard held up to girls as that upon which they should form themselves . . . "the essence of a lady is to be remarkable in no way,"

or words to that effect. Horrid doctrine! subversive of all individuality! which would reduce all womankind to the Mrs. Governor type, "Papa, potato, poultry, prunes, and prism."

No one could say of Esther Sweynson that there was the shadow of a doubt as to her being a lady, but she was, nevertheless, very remarkable, both in mind and appearance.

"Aha!" was my reflection, and I rubbed my hands mentally, as I made it, "Lifton won't find it so easy to make *this* girl blush and cast down her eyes. What a lark! But he'll try *all the more*. *I know him*."

Then I looked at Aldyth, and found her watching me, with a smile.

"You are as much astonished as we were at the change, Philip."

I looked again at Lifton and Esther. He had gone up to her with an eager, cordial expression, and some *empressement* in his manner. I knew that in this he recognized something more than an ordinary meeting. I wondered much what Esther would do; formerly, my brother used to have some influence over her, as I very well knew; and it seemed to my partial eyes that he could not fail to retain it yet. I did not believe she had met with his equal, much less his superior, in her absence;

and despite all this new dignity and *savoir faire*, I waited some change in her graceful manner—some lighting-up of her face, or casting down of her eyes. Surely she would give some sign that he was not among the commonplace people of her acquaintance!

Blank disappointment met me. She certainly shook hands with him, spoke to him, and smiled as she spoke, but all in the coldest manner I had ever seen; nor have I beheld anything like it since. Her smile was sweet, but icy. There was no meaning in her handshake. Her eyes met his calmly, coldly, utterly unmoved.

I felt a sudden shock of fear. It seemed to me that something dreadful must have happened. I looked at Lifton, to see how he took the unexpected greeting, and I saw one look of the intensest dismay and bewilderment pass over his face, after which he followed her lead, and without leaving her side, or ceasing to talk to her, became transformed into an ordinary acquaintance, whom she might have met once before.

My pleasure was over. I was cut to the heart. Lifton's look of tender, gallant delight at seeing her again, and the dead blank of coolness with which he was met, his own amazed bewilderment at this new style of

treatment, and my forebodings of evil, poisoned my pleasure. Yet, I continued to watch them, as of old ; it came by instinct.

She seemed to ask him some questions, which he answered in tones as politely frozen as her own, and then they looked in my direction, and Esther came up to speak to me.

"I have been asking Mr. Darwin how you are, Philip," said she ; and the formal way of speaking of him struck me the more, as he was now "Lifton," even to Caroline. Her tone to me was as cordial as ever, and she went on—"I am very glad to hear that you are stronger than you were."

Lifton had not followed her : he stayed where he was, and was now talking to Sybil Leslie and Caroline.

"Are you glad to be home again, Esther?"

"Oh yes ! home is the best place after all—particularly when every one is so glad to see one, as Aldyth was to see me."

And she laid her hand for an instant upon her sister's.

Here Lucy came, and called Aldyth away, leaving Esther and me alone.

"I am glad to hear that you are pleased to get home," said I, plunging at once, with blind, blundering haste into my grievance ; "because

I can tell Lifton that you yourself have told me so."

"What do you mean?" (looking quickly at me).

"I watched you when Lifton spoke to you, and I don't think you gave *him* the impression that you were glad to be home again."

She said in rather a faint voice, "I really do not understand: please explain yourself;" but the fiery flush that burnt upon her cheeks belied her words. She could be cold to him, because she was too proud to let him see what she felt, but my thrusts were unscrupulous, and not so easily parried.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot, or days o' lang syne?" I asked, quickly.

"No. And I never do forget my old acquaintance."

"You may not forget them, but you may change to them, which is perhaps worse."

"Philip, speak out!" said she, almost angrily. "I don't like hints. I want to know what you are talking about, and what I have done to make you so savage."

"My answer must be another question. What has Lifton done that you should speak to him as if you wanted your words to freeze him, and smile at him as if you were Me-

dusa, and desired to petrify him where he stood?"

"I do not own your right to ask me any such questions. I have not been at all rude to Mr. Darwin. What would you have had me do? Rush at him, as if I thought of embracing him? I am surprised at you."

I was silent. What could I say? After all, she had a right to be cold to him, if she so pleased, and I had no right to interfere.

Some one came, and asked her to sing; and I was left alone to meditate upon what I had done, and wonder whether I had not been a fool for my pains. I came to the conclusion that I had not. I was glad, after all that I had spoken, and let her see that I knew she was changed. Some day I would do more. I would make her tell me *why* she was changed, . . . unless, indeed, Lifton found out first, and made it all right again, in which consummation I hoped and trusted, or tried to do so.

Later in the evening Lifton came to me, and said he found it uncommonly slow—was I ready to go? I assented, upon which we took our leave and went home.

CHAPTER III.

A RIDDLE.



AT Campion, during the summer season, there was usually a certain amount of what, for want of a better name, maybe called dissipation. This round consisted chiefly of picnics, croquet (though there was not so much of that then), archery, and other graceful and rural amusements.

After Esther's return various entertainments of the usual description came off. I was present at none ; but Lifton was too valuable a person to escape invitations, both written and personal. To judge from what various ladies told him, his presence was indispensable to the well-being of the different festivities. He must come to this and that picnic, or it would be a failure. He must be present at Mrs. Weston's archery meeting, though, as he privately informed Caroline and me, he thought there were few

things to be seen of a much more idiotic character than one of these same archery gatherings, with the male and female "amateur Robin Hoods" disporting themselves thereat.

But that was nothing : he must go, said Caroline, coolly : "Even if you don't shoot, you know, you may be passively useful as a target."

Lifton looked at her, puzzled, for one moment, and then burst into a laugh.

"So I may. Should I fix a blood-red rosette just where my heart is?"

"Whereabouts would you put it in that case?" she asked.

"Does the seat of the heart vary with the individual?"

"Certainly. I will proceed to give you a few examples. If Philip wished to indicate his, he would have a likeness of you pinned over his literal heart. Aldyth would wear a map of Australia on her bosom, with the place where John Ferriers is printed disproportionately large. Madeline Weston would have a purse and a view of a large millinery and drapery establishment fastened round her neck. Bob would rejoice in a plan of a cotton mill with fifty thousand looms and spindles and things in *it*. Harold would wear a phylactery, with

"Church, State, and the Landed and Country Gentleman's Interest" embroidered upon it. Lucy's heart is a mixture of babies, servants, and Harold's superiority, with a proud consciousness of her own propriety and orthodoxy. Esther . . . "

"Yes, we are all attention. Esther! where, or what would be her badge?" (This from me, while Lifton looked rather eagerly on.)

"Esther has never told me," said Caroline, looking steadfastly at my brother.

"No more has Harold, or Aldyth, or Bob."

"I know that. But I do not choose to say anything about Esther."

"Very well. Perhaps you will favour us with some information as to your own."

"Sorry I can't, for very excellent reasons."

"Won't you enlighten us?"

"Certainly. I cannot tell you anything about my heart, because I have none. I think hearts are all humbug."

"I never heard of a young lady without heart before," said Lifton, quietly, "and I have a strong impression that some day Miss Caroline Sweynson will find the article in question was only mislaid, not wanting."

"It is foolish to have strong impressions upon subjects that you are not acquainted

with," said Caroline, gravely. "Indeed, I think all strong impressions do harm."

Lifton shook his head.

"Life would be worth nothing without strong impressions, Carrie."

"I don't think so. I never had a strong impression upon any subject, except Harold's marriage; and I think now, that I made far too much fuss about that. If he chose to be an idiot, it was no business of mine. And I never was so miserable as when I gave way to my 'feelings' then. I have made up my mind never to feel any more about anything."

Lifton turned away without speaking, and I said, in a voice whose sadness I could not help, though I knew she would laugh at it,

"Caroline, I wish you would not talk in that way. It pains me."

"A little pain is good sometimes" (indifferently).

"Some kinds of pain. Not that."

"What do you know about it, I wonder?"

This is a digression from the picnic subject. As I said, I never went to them; but Lifton was at nearly all, and I knew that at most of them he met Esther Sweynson. Sometimes he would tell me who he had seen, and would mention her name among the rest; sometimes

he would be perfectly silent as to what the day had been, whom the guests ; in fact, as to every circumstance. At such times, I did not dare to ask him any questions, but it went to my heart to see the look of dejection that he often wore on his return from some of these excursions. I knew by it that Esther had never showed him any more kindness than at first, and that at times he despaired of being on any different footing with her. So it went on all summer, and there were times when I felt an absolute dislike towards Esther. I scarcely ever saw her. I had not met her alone since that evening at Follyfoot.

My only wonder was that Lifton let it go on so long as he did without coming to an explanation. Afterwards I found that it was because he feared her answer, feared to hear that some other held the place he wanted. For his own part, every time that he saw her only made him know more surely that he loved her only and entirely, and that, could he have his own way, he would choose her out from all the world.

One morning, in the beginning of September, Lifton was bidden to a picnic. It was the last there would be that season, and was given by the Mostyns ; from which I knew, without ask-

ing any one, that Esther would be there. The rendezvous was to be the railway station, from which they were all to go ; the time, ten o'clock. We were at breakfast, and had the "Times" of the day before, at which neither of us had looked, for he had been out on that day also.

Lifton was reading a letter, which he had previously informed me was from "Denton," an erratic acquaintance of ours, who was author, artist, critic, and good fellow, all in an amateur kind of way. Other profession or calling he had none. He called himself, "Fred Denton, vagabond," and perhaps it was the best name that could have been devised for him. He managed to spend a good deal more money than he had ; he knew a great many people in a great many places, and could describe them in a clever, amusing way that made his letters worth reading—once, after which they were forgotten.

"Holloa !" said Lifton, suddenly, flushing a little, and looking excited.

"What is it ?"

"Wait a minute, and you shall see."

He finished the letter, and handed it to me.

It was written from Paris, and after a good

deal of very amusing gossip about various people and things, our friend proceeded :

“ Don’t be *too* overcome when I tell you who was married the other day. You would hardly guess that it was Mademoiselle de Laurence. Yes, Nina has done it. The victim is that Italian fellow, upon my word I forget his name, but you’ll remember him. He was at Rome when you and I and she and her uncle were all there. Before you came, she had been fooling him to the top of his bent, and then she threw him over. However, they have made it up again, and are now one (so to speak). But, seriously, I used to wonder how it was that you never made a fool of yourself over her. She would have thanked you to cheat her ; she could not forgive you for being honest with her ; but you were always a strong-minded sort of fellow, even in the hottest weather. I saw the wedding. It was no end of a swell one, &c., &c.”

I have said nothing about Nina de Laurence before. She was a Frenchwoman, handsome, rich, witty, and self-willed. We had first met her at Naples at an hotel, then at other places on the Continent, and finally at the house of her uncle, at Paris. He was an old bachelor, and she his heiress, and the mistress of his house.

It was the old story. She was angry that Lifton, after her graciousness, was not at her feet, and used every art to subdue him, till learning that it was vain (there are *some* women who know when they are defeated), her liking, it was not love, turned—naturally with her—to hate. I knew her vindictive; I knew she would not be sorry to do either of us an evil turn, but this marriage to her old admirer looked as if she had come to herself again.

“Ah!” said I, as I read it, “I am glad to see that.”

“So am I.”

He would not say any more about it, for it was a subject he hated, so we let it drop.

“I wonder what time you will be back, Lifton?”

“I really cannot tell. Certainly not to dinner.”

“Do you want to go?” I asked, abruptly.

“N-o. I suppose I do . . . or I should not be going, should I?”

“Of course you might be going.”

“Well, I believe I do want to go. It is very cracked, I know, but ’tis true, and truth is ever strange, &c.”

Then, saying that he must be quick, or he would be too late for the train, he departed,

leaving Denton's letter for me to read over again if I chose, which I did not, but later in the day took it with me to the library, and stuck it into one of the pigeon-holes of my davenport. I had a long and lonely day, but it passed as they all do, somehow, and at half-past nine in the evening, I was wondering when he would be coming home.

I was in the library, which had a long window to the lawn. There was a fire, but the window was open, and I was sitting by it, in an easy chair, trying to make out the indistinct forms of trees and shrubs in the dusk, which was now almost darkness.

There was a weird stillness about the night which thrilled my nerves. I say stillness, but it was only like the fitful stillness of unrest.

The sky was all gray clouds, which hurried along quickly, always rolling the same way, and yet never permitting a ray of light to steal through them. I was thinking that it answered exactly to that weird little description in "The Valley of Unrest":

" Ah, by no wind are stirred those trees
That palpitate like the chill seas
Around the misty Hebrides !
Ah, by no wind those clouds are driven,
That rustle through the unquiet heaven,
Uneasily, from morn till even !"

I could not *see* the trees ; only their faint rustle in the noiseless wind told me that they were there. I felt terrified of the night, and attracted by it. I began to experience a wish to pass out of the room to the garden, and to feel that strange ghostly air blow upon my face. My mind was possessed by thoughts of lonely fastnesses among the mountains ; I seemed to see Wastwater sleeping in sullen shadow under her mountain guards ; or Brother's Water, with the bleak wastes of hill sweeping away from it, as if they knew how evil it was, and would fly if they could, and leave it to the four ghosts that always hover round it ; or the rifted chasm of Mickledore, with its brooding shadows. These places are always grand and awful and hard to bear, even in broad daylight, and at night they oppress me with their desolation, and make me feel as if the hand of God touched me ; that is, when I dare to see them in my mind so plainly as I did just then.

Thus I had sat for half an hour or more, growing every minute more fascinated, and drawn to the mysterious world out of doors, when suddenly the spell was broken. I saw some one coming towards me—a man.

I felt no fear of him. A human presence, after the breathless state of awe and suspense

in which I had been sitting, was a relief, let the being be what he might. This man walked up the lawn slowly. It seemed to me that his head was hanging, and he trailed one foot after the other, as if too weary to care how he walked. No wonder I failed to know him for my brother Lifton, till he confronted me, and then the pale face, hollow eyes, and half scornful, half despairing expression were so different from his, that I stared at him in wonder and fright. I felt more than that; a thrill of sick uneasiness shook me, such as I had never felt before, for I had never seen Lifton look so before, and had yet to learn what terrors we may undergo in watching the sufferings of those we love.

"Lifton!" I cried, rising and looking at him, "what is it? Why are you coming in in this way? What has happened?"

I seized his hand, and tried to pull him in. He looked at me, but for the first time in my life he looked at me without a smile. Nevertheless, he came in, walked into the room, and sitting down, leaned his arms on his knees, and stared before him indifferently, and yet, as I felt, with intense emotion of some kind.

"Lifton!" I gasped, "if you don't tell me what ails you, I shall go distracted."

He looked up, met my eyes, and woke from his trance of despair.

"Oh, nothing ails me," said he, brusquely.
"What should be the matter with me?"

"What has she been doing?" was my almost breathless question.

At last I had hit the mark. He smiled bitterly and said,

"I should like to ask you a few questions, Phil, about *her*, you know. Before she went away, did you think she cared for me? You watch people a great deal."

"Yes, I was sure of it."

"You know what her manner was then. Did not her every look, word, action, say that I was something more to her than others were?"

"I thought so."

"She could hardly look me in the face, for fear I should see too much in her eyes. If ever a girl loved, she loved me then. You know what she is like now."

"Yes, I do."

"To-day I was determined to be no longer in this state of purgatory. She was just as icy as ever; she looked at me and spoke to me in that way she has got so apt in lately, that seems to say, 'Come a step further, and I will freeze you into stone where you stand.' But I did go a step nearer. We happened to be alone late

in the afternoon, when it was almost time to go, and I asked her why she behaved to me as she did, as if I were a dog, no, worse than that, for she is very fond of Rough" (with a sneer). "She denied that she was cold, said she treated me as she would any other acquaintance. Then I resolved to try for it all, and see if I could not startle her into a change."

He paused a moment, and bit his lips.

"Well?"

"I asked her if she remembered the day we went to that picnic to the Blue Bay, and what happened in the cave. *Then* she could let me kiss her, and could cling to my arm in her danger, as if I were all the world to her, for all she was so independent now. She did not like that, so I said she must hear me to the end. I told her I loved her, and had never cared for any other woman, and never *should*. I offered her my life, my heart, my very soul, to devote them to her and her happiness, and I said it was all too little."

"Just like you! You made yourself far too cheap!" cried I, in irrepressible indignation.

"Cheap or dear, I was not good enough for her to touch, it seems. She . . . laughed at me."

"Laughed!"

I could say no more. I was cold with horror. Lifton's love laughed at! Esther Sweynson must be mad, quite mad, and at that moment I absolutely hated her.

"Did you ever feel all at once as if you had ice in your veins instead of blood? I did then, for a moment, and then I think I got into a passion, and spoke out. I told her she should answer me before I let her go, and that I believed she was afraid of me, for she had deceived me, and a bad conscience generally brings fear. She looked at me as if I were mad, and said, '*I deceive you!* This is too much!' and . . ."

"She said that?" cried I, with sudden illumination of mind.

"What will not a woman say?" he asked, with trenchant contempt. "I asked if she would swear she did not love me . . ."

"She could not do *that*," said I, triumphantly.

"Poor Philip! You do not know much about women . . . flirts! She said she had no more love for me than I had for her, and that we had better put an end to such a farce. She added that my impertinence in beginning it was unequalled . . . I had no idea what suffering was before, Phil . . . to be accused of impertinence by *her*!"

He turned his pale face and miserable eyes to me as he spoke. It had been worse to him—this charge of want of respect—than even the rejection of his love.

I could say nothing. It seemed as if the whole world had been turned upside down, and that I was living in some nightmare.

"She turned away from me then, and wanted to go, but I stopped her, and said she should tell me what she meant. I asked her if she believed I lied when I said I loved her. That made her pause a moment. Then she said, 'Every word of that kind that you say to me is an insult. I reject your offer. I do not love you, and I wish to hear no more of the subject. To say more to me would be the grossest disrespect.' Then I let her go, or rather I felt as if I had no power to move or speak, but . . ."

"She did not look you in the face when she said she did not love you?" said I.

"Didn't she? Her eyes never wavered for a moment, though she was very white. I remember even her lips were white. I am sure mine were. We should no doubt have 'given a turn' to any one who had seen us just then," he finished, with a grating laugh.

"Well," was my comment, "whether she said it once or fifty times, whether she looked

you in the face or not, she told an untruth when she said she did not love you. She does love you, and there is something that would account for all this, if we knew it."

"I don't know anything about that," said he, gloomily, "but I do know that I never was so deceived in my life, and I'll never believe in a woman again!"

"Then you mean to give her up?"

"Give her up? What else can I do? If she had spoken to you as she did to me to-day, you would hardly ask that."

"I only know this, that I would never give her up until I knew why she would not have me."

"She has told me why. She does not care two straws for me. Isn't that enough? Talk of women of the world having no heart . . . that's but a tithe of the truth. No women have any heart . . . except the thing with which they enjoy men's sufferings. I was not so experienced as I thought, and I've been cheated, that's all. *Experientia docet.*"

Honestly thinking that Lifton's was the very hardest case in all the annals of true love, I yet ventured to disagree with him on one or two points.

"Rubbish! Gammon!" said I. "Yes, you

may look as furious as you like. Just look here. If she had been what you call her, do you suppose she would have *refused* you? Why, man, you are the best match anywhere near here. Do see reason. She would have married your money and your position to-morrow, if she had disliked you ever so much; and I tell you she *does* love you. I haven't watched her for nothing. If you can find out what has been said or done to abuse her mind about you, you may win her yet; and if my words don't come true, I'm as ready as Mr. Grimsby was, to eat my head."

I had spoken emphatically, for me almost violently. I was absolutely convinced of the truth of what I said, and I longed for some power to transfer my certainty to him. He turned to me with parted lips, and said, in a voice that was not his own,

"Phil, if you are only talking for the sake of talking, I shall never trust you again. You don't know what this is to me. I hardly dare confess it to myself."

"I believe what I have told you as firmly as I believe that I am alive. I can't say more than that."

He did not speak, but turned to the window, still open, and looked out upon the night, which

had no voice of hope for him. All he heard in the wind or saw in the shadowy trees, was that he had failed and been cheated. Nothing could banish from his mind the echo of Esther's words, "I do not love you."

It was the first time I had ever seen my brother so occupied with himself and his own concerns, as to be oblivious of me and mine. For a time this nearly overcame me. I longed, with a passionate, straining earnestness, to be able to do or say something to console him. My very eagerness prevented what I wished. A rush of miserable conviction that I was impotent, useless, good-for-nothing, and feeble beyond words, came over me like a flood, so that I was unable even to speak.

He had been so good to me, so kind and forbearing, as tender as a mother, as gentle as a girl, and now, when his trouble came, it seemed that I was useless to him.

I suffered intensely from this idea. A burning sensation rose in my throat and eyes, as I looked at his figure, leaning against the window, with that droop of despondency and defeat so new to it, and which sat so strangely upon it.

Almost in the same moment I vowed that, cost me what it might, I would have an explana-

tion with Esther, and would compel her to tell me her reason for her behaviour to my brother.

I felt happier as soon as I had thus resolved, and was able to call to Lifton and say, "Come in, Lifton! Don't be down about it. I'm certain it will turn out all right."

"It would if you had the ordering of it, but you are not omnipotent."

"I know that, but I'm certain, quite certain, of what I say."

"Because you think no one can resist your amiable and interesting brother," he sneered.

"I am sure Esther Sweynson cannot."

"You must be infatuated or idiotic" (testily), "after what I have told you just now."

I did not reply. Lifton came into the room, and, drawing a chair up to the fire, stretched himself out, and employed himself moodily in doing nothing at all. After an hour or so spent thus cheerfully, I wished him good-night, and retired to meditate upon the means I should take to surprise Esther into a confession.

CHAPTER IV.

I SOLVE THE RIDDLE.



WAS forced to own, after a few days, that my brother carried his trouble well. I knew perfectly well that he was in trouble. I should have known it even if he had never made his confession to me, for I had watched him and studied him for years, but I do not think any one else would have guessed how things had been going with him.

He had not met Esther Sweynson anywhere since that unhappy picnic; we had heard no news of her, nor seen anything of the family, until one day we heard that Esther was ill.

It was Lifton who told me. He came in to lunch one day, and I saw from the way in which he pushed away his plate, after scarcely tasting the food upon it, and by his listless, yet anxious

look, that something had happened. I asked if he had heard any bad news.

"Depends upon what you call bad news."

"Well, *what* news have you heard? Any at all?"

"I saw Sweynson this morning, and he gave me two pieces of information."

"And they are . . .?"

"They have heard that young Ferriers is very ill, or was. I dare say he is dead by now."

"Oh! what will Aldyth do?"

"If she were like her sisters, I should say she would not care much about it. But she isn't. It's a pity that the only one worth anything should be wasting her life all these years waiting for that man."

"That is bad news enough, but it does not account for your dejection."

"Dejection! I am not dejected. Why, in heaven's name, should I be dejected?"

"That's just what I want to know. I suppose I may not ask what was the other piece of news?"

"Did I say there was another? Oh, yes, Esther Sweynson is ill, Harold says."

"Esther ill? What is the matter with her?"

"They cannot tell yet ; they have no idea. She *is* very ill."

"Have they sent for a doctor?"

"I suppose so, I did not ask" (attempting, with poor success, to speak in a tone of serene indifference).

"When did she begin?"

"Yesterday. Fainted, or something. Sweynson seemed rather uneasy. The doctor said it might turn to scarlet fever. None of them have had it."

I thought this precise information did not tally very exactly with his profession of indifference, but I did not venture to say so. Lifton's uneasiness was, however, quite accounted for in my eyes.

Some days passed, and Esther's illness was pronounced to be scarlet fever in reality. Where she had taken it was not discovered. She had rather a sharp attack ; but though both Caroline and Emma took the complaint, it was only very slightly, and they soon recovered, and were as well as ever again ; but from various accounts that I heard of Esther, I gathered that though free from the complaint, she did not rally or gain strength. My desire to see her grew intense. I was sure—certain, that something preyed upon her mind, and a feeling took possession of me

that I could make all right could I only see her. At last I gained my end. It was one afternoon at the end of September—the very last day, I believe. I had gone out for a drive in the low phaeton that Lifton himself had bought for me. Of course it was not in my power to drive myself; I simply lay back and enjoyed myself, and that day I enjoyed it especially, for it was a perfect autumn afternoon.

To my mind September is the most beautiful of all the months in England, and I found it so at Campion. It was one of those indescribable days—rich, peaceful, calm and perfect, yet, withal, most melancholy. The sky was blue, but a very pale, dusky blue, toning off into a faint yellow towards the horizon, and under it lay the hills and the sea, the latter of a sober gray, the former richly tinted with the purple of the heather, and the vivid tints of yellowing bracken and scarlet bilberry leaves. I know some lines of Bryant's which better describe it than anything I can say :

. "The mountains that enfold
In their wide sweep the coloured landscape round,
Seem groups of giant kings in purple and gold,
That guard the enchanted land."

This English-lake country is an enchanted land, having in its rugged homeliness and

gray severity a charm that is found in no other.

We drove a long way, far past Croft Head, old Mr. Ferriers' house, till we got upon the high, breezy mountain road over the moor, which at times could look so desolate, but which was now soft and mellow with the rest of the landscape.

I lay back, looking dreamily, as mountain after mountain was revealed in ever-varying aspect of form and colour, as we drove on. I could see in the distance the gleam of one lake, and two or three weird and desolate tarns, unknown to tourists, unvisited by sketchers and painters. To the left below was the sea. On a clear day the peaks of Man would have been visible, as well as Scotch hills to the north ; but to-day the haze of autumn obscured all.

Finding that from this point the road descended I told the man to return, and we drove slowly down towards Campion. It took us about an hour to reach the village, and as we drove through it I saw Caroline Sweynson coming out of the post-office.

Here was an opportunity of finding out how Esther was, and as to when I might best hope to see her alone. I stopped the phaeton and signalled to her.

She came up to me saying, " Good afternoon ; you are going to give me a seat of course, or you would not have given me the trouble of coming across the road."

" Yes, I was going to ask you to come in ; but will you drive, because you see I cannot offer to give you my seat ?"

" Oh yes, I will drive."

So the coachman went behind, and Caroline, getting in, took the reins.

" I shall drive to the Dower House, unless you are afraid of infection ; I don't think there is any need for that."

" I have had scarlet fever, so I am not afraid. Are all your people at home this afternoon ?"

" No ; Esther is by herself. Miss Barton, Aldyth, and Emma have gone to see that wretched old Ferriers, and talk about Jack, I suppose. They are then going to Follyfoot to dine, and spend the evening. Lucy was kind enough to ask me, by way of a treat, I suppose, but I mean to use my late indisposition in an unscrupulous manner, and make it an excuse for doing everything I like, and leaving undone everything I don't like."

" Moral ! How is Esther now ? I want to see her. Do you think she would see me this afternoon ?"

"I will take you in without asking her."

"You will do no such thing unless you can assure me that she is strong enough to receive visitors."

"Mild, but firm to the last. You *do* amuse me, Philip! There has been nothing the matter with her to speak of, and I am *quite sure* that nothing ails her now but temper."

"Temper!" I was scandalised.

"Yes. I dare say boys like you suppose that ethereal-looking beings like Esther are made without tempers, but I assure you you don't know everything."

"Seriously, I want to see Esther, about something particular; and if you think it would not be too much for her, I would call this afternoon."

"Something particular? That means you want to see her alone. How can I tell whether it will be too much for her unless I know what it is? Perhaps you think of proposing to her."

After this there was silence for some two minutes. I suppose my face told what I suffered from what seemed to me the most cruel taunt that could have been invented to gall me. No doubt I went crimson. I could not speak, and when Caroline did it was with a laugh somewhat constrained.

"I suppose I ought to say I beg ten thousand pardons, and can never know a moment's peace till you forgive me ; but of course you know that I spoke in jest."

"I suppose you did," I managed to say ; but just then it seemed insupportable that people should be able to say such things to me. Certainly Caroline Sweynson was not scrupulous as to whether her victims were sensitive or not. She seemed to decide, however, that she had perhaps said enough, so we had no more conversation till we came to the Dower House, when she gave me her arm to lean upon in silence.

She led me into the drawing-room, where I saw Esther, looking, to me, extremely pale and delicate. She had apparently been doing nothing at all. There were some books near her, and some trifle of fancy-work upon the table, but it was evident that she had been neither reading nor working.

"I have brought you a visitor," said Caroline, tranquilly, "or, perhaps I should say, he brought me. Have you had tea?"

"Yes, I had some at four."

"Well, I shall go and get some in the kitchen, if I can prevail upon cook to give it me. She is a dreadful tyrant to me. Philip, does your cook ever lecture Lifton?"

"Good gracious! no."

"Then he is a happy man. Tell him so from me. Shall I use my influence with our interesting retainer to get you some of the 'cup that cheers but not inebriates'?"

"No, thank you; I want nothing."

Caroline gave me a look which I understood to mean that she should not return to the room for some time, and then disappearing, she left me with Esther. My opportunity had come at last, but I did not know whether to be glad or sorry for it. Esther looked as if she had suffered; she was changed. She was always pale, but to-day she looked fragile.

"We never seem to meet now, Esther. I have hardly seen you more than once since you came home."

"No, it has been unfortunate. You see I have been ill, and"

I thought she looked at me anxiously, as if to try and learn whether I knew anything.

"Caroline told me you were alone, and I thought you would see me. You don't mind my coming, I hope. Perhaps you are not strong enough for visitors yet?"

"I am very glad to see you, and I am *quite* well, thanks. There is nothing whatever the

matter with me, only I don't feel very strong yet."

"I suppose you have not heard anything more about Mr. Ferriers?"

"No. Aldyth is in a very anxious state about him. We cannot hear for six weeks yet."

"Was he dangerously ill?"

"Hardly that I fancy, at least I hope not; and I try to make Aldyth think as I do. My brother Edmund is not given to exaggerating, and he gave us the merest general facts; no more."

"I hope you will soon have good news about him. Lifton is not very well, either."

"What is the matter with him?"

"Oh, he has no complaint except general dejection. I cannot make him cheerful."

"Ah! I am sorry he is so."

"You know the reason, Esther, as well as any one."

"I?" (flushing scarlet.)

"Yes. He was all right till that picnic at which you behaved so kindly to him."

"I . . . don't know what you mean."

"You do know what I mean."

"Did he tell you, then, what he said to me?"

"Yes. And also what you said to him. If any one but himself had told me I would not have believed it."

"Would not have believed what? That he asked me . . . told me, I mean . . ."

"Nothing that *he* said, but that *you* could say you did not care for him; did not love him. That is what I would not have believed. And though you say it, I do not believe it now."

I had cast my stone, and now I waited to see what effect the throw would have.

There was a great struggle in her face. Some intensely painful feeling had to be overcome before she could summon up the haughty coldness with which she answered at last,

"I am at a loss to understand you, Philip. It is very bad taste on your part to take upon yourself such a mission. Suppose we change the subject."

"You may rail at my want of taste, or anything you like in my manners. I did not come here to behave prettily, but to say something I have to say to you."

She did not speak for a moment. If she had had her usual health and strength, I do not think she would have permitted me to go on; but she was weak; she was shaken; she had neither bodily nor mental power to oppose me.

"*I have done nothing that I need repent of,*" she said, at last. "*Pray say what you have to say, but take care you do not go too far*" (with that look that made Lifton say she was Queen Esther, in spite of her shyness).

"This is what I have to say : Lifton told you he loved you ; offered you all ; his life's devotion ; and you refused him, giving as your reason that you did not love him. That was an untruth, told to conceal your real reason. I want to know who has been slandering him to you, for whatever evil you have heard of him is slander, and false. Any woman should be proud to be loved by him. I say again, I want to know who has slandered him !"

She smiled incredulously, and replied,

"He is very kind and good to you, I do not doubt ; but he may have secrets from you for all that. You are over-confident to speak of him so."

"I know he may have secrets from me ; he has ; but they are not disgraceful ones : they are nothing that would not bear the light of day. I will stake my life upon it."

"In the world, and by worldly people, it may be thought so, but my code of honour is higher than that of the world."

"What do you mean ?" cried I, maddened by

her words, and impressed—I could not help it—by the cold disdain of her manner and voice.

“At any rate, I have a right to know what has been said against him, and by whom, and *you* had no right to believe any evil of him without proof.”

“Pray who told you I had no proof? I deny that you have any right to know. He, if any one, has that right. But there is no reason to continue this conversation.”

“Esther, surely you can trust me! I thought we were friends; I did not think you would treat me in this way!”

She had risen, and stood by the window. Till now her face had been pale as death, immobile as stone. Now it changed at once, as if some chord had been struck whose echoes made music too sad to be borne, and she broke forth passionately,

“I *did* think you were my friend. I thought *he* was my friend. I believed in him as firmly as one can believe in anything. I would have trusted him blindly with everything most dear to me.”

She turned away from me, not weeping: her anguish lay too deep for tears, but with hopeless eyes and tremulous lips, looking out upon the day, as Lifton had looked upon the night.

I could not speak ; and presently she went on, in the same low, but intense voice,

“I did love him ! I loved him almost the first time I saw him ; and I thought him a good man. But *now !*”

There was a pause of anguish so intense that her pain seemed to pass to my very soul, and I suffered as much as she did.

Then she burst into tears, wrung her hands, and said, “Lifton ! Lifton !” in a voice of such bitter, bitter sorrow as I hope I shall never hear again.

For a moment I felt as if all were lost. Then I remembered that even yet I did not know what this wrong was, what the sin of which he stood accused.

I broke the silence which followed her despairing call upon his name by saying,

“Yet you have not told me, Esther, in what he has deceived you. I think, after this, you owe it to me to do so.”

“I suppose I do. It seems a pity to give you such a blow. But I suppose these things will happen sometimes. He had no [right to offer me his love ; no right to ask me to [marry him. He is engaged to another woman, and has been for years ; since before you came to Hoarstones.”

I saw what it cost her to make this avowal ; and if I had not known Lifton, I should have suffered with her. As it was, the reaction after my terror and suspense was so great, that I burst into a fit of laughter. Lifton engaged to another woman ! Every fear, every doubt vanished. Out of the chaos of uncertainty I suddenly beheld reason and order evolved.

My laughter, however, had the effect of alarming Esther. She did not understand it, of course. She had been acting in what was to her a tragedy, and my laugh grated upon her nerves.

"What are you laughing at ?" she demanded, looking at me with flashing eyes. "I think you must be beside yourself this afternoon."

"Oh, forgive me !" I cried, grave again in an instant ; "I repent, but if you knew how relieved I am to find that you have nothing worse to say than that."

"I do not see how it could well be much worse."

"No, if it were true, which it is not."

"Why should I believe you ?"

"Tell me the name of the lady to whom he is engaged. It strikes me that it is Esther Sweynson !"

"Certainly not. It is sufficient that you know my reason for refusing him."

"What proof did she offer you as to the truth of her words?"

"I have every reason to believe her. And she showed me the ring he gave her."

"Lifton never gave a ring to any lady; *never!*"

"Again I say you know nothing at all about it."

"Whoever it was, she told you a lot of lies. Look to it, Esther; you don't know what you may have to answer for if you persist in acting in this way. Every word you have said more and more convinces me that he has been slandered to you."

"Mademoiselle de L——" She stopped, bit her lips, and looked, hoping that I might be no wiser for her slip of the tongue.

"Ah-h-h!" I uttered, almost lost in admiration; "so it was Mademoiselle de Laurence. If I had known that you knew her, I should never have been at fault for a moment. So she said Lifton was engaged to her."

"Yes, and I believe he is."

"Oh, Esther! I could not have thought you would let a woman like that, as false as anything you like to name, take away his good name, and vilify him, without defending him!"

"Disprove it," was all she said, but her face

had changed. She was leaning towards me with all her soul in her eyes, and that soul only asked that the man whom she had believed in, and whom she yet loved, in spite of herself, should be given back to her.

Oh, that letter from our careless friend, Denton ! How I blessed him for having written it ! How I loved him ! How warmly I would have grasped his hand, if he had been there ! I felt like a brother to him.

"Make your mind quite easy," said I. "To-morrow you shall have the proof that you have been deceived, not he deceiving you."

"Is she dead ?"

"No ; married."

I had never said two words with such intense satisfaction.

"Married ?"

"Certainly. Why not ? There was no reason why she should not be married, but I think that is sufficient to prove that she spoke untruth with respect to my brother."

As she neither spoke nor made any sign, I asked if she did not believe me, adding that I had the proof ; she need not fear ; it was only at Hoarstones.

"I believe you ; but that does not do away with what she said, that he had ruined her peace

of mind, led her on to love him, and left her without even saying good-bye to her."

"Only wait! only wait till to-morrow, Esther, and all will be as clear as the day."

"Let me alone, let me think over it all," said she, faintly. "It is too much for me; it makes me feel ill."

Indeed she did look very pale, and without giving me time to say a word more, she quitted the room, and I heard her foot on the stair.

Caroline, having heard the door open and close, presented herself.

"Have I done right? Have I given you enough time to say your something particular to my amiable sister?"

"Yes. You never did me such a kindness before, Caroline."

"Glad to hear that any one can accuse me of kindness. It is not a fault I am often taxed with."

"I am glad to tax you now."

"You had better stay and have dinner with us. It is getting late. Your brother will know where you are."

"On the contrary, he will be very uneasy about me, and will even now be wondering where I am, and what I can be doing."

"He is quite a mother to you."

"He is, indeed. There is the phaeton. *May* I ask you to allow me to take your arm? I have not got my crutch."

She put out her arm willingly enough, and went with me down the steps, waving her hand to me as I drove away.

I had not much time for reflection in my drive from the Dower House to Hoarstones, but even in that short space of time my mind was torn with many doubts, not as to whether I had done right, but as to what Lifton would say to me when he knew on what errand I had been. I had a vague fear that his pride might be offended at what I had done. I dreaded to hear him say coldly, "No doubt you meant well, but there was no need for your interference."

Until dinner was over, all that I could say was that I had been calling at the Dower House, and had not known how late] it was, but when we were alone in the library, I felt that I had a confession to make. Lifton did not ask me any questions. Lately he had scarcely ever mentioned any of the Sweynsons.

I judged it best not to beat about the bush much, so I said,

"I saw Esther Sweynson this afternoon."

"Ah, did you?"

“Yes, I met Caroline in the village, and offered to drive her home. When I got there I found that Esther was alone, and as I wished to have some conversation with her, I went in.”

“Conversation?” (suspiciously).

“Yes. Did not I tell you that when she told you she did not love you . . .”

Lifton frowned.

“Philip, let us drop that subject. It is over, if you please. I hope you said nothing to her about it. You could have done nothing more displeasing to me.”

His tone prepared me for a rebuke when he should know all, but having in mind the adage about a soft answer, I said, humbly,

“I hope you will not be very angry with me, Lifton, when you have heard. I was sure that some one had been maligning you to her, and it is true.”

He looked at me quickly, but did not silence me again. I thought, too, that I saw some anxiety in his glance. Somewhat emboldened, I went on,

“She met Mademoiselle de Laurence when she was abroad.”

“Well?”

“And she, with her usual scrupulous regard

for truth, and her Christian feelings towards you, told Esther that you were engaged to her. I could not get particulars from Esther, of course, but I should fancy she must have betrayed some feeling for you, and so put herself at the mercy of that woman. And you know she would have no chance against her. She believed her, and that is why she has treated you in such an extraordinary way. She thought you were playing fast and loose with them both. She is very proud, so she wouldn't stand it."

He was standing on the hearthrug, looking down upon me as I spoke. He made no observation, no comment, so at last I said timidly,

"Esther does love you yet, Lifton ; I am sure she does."

"Did she tell you so?"

"No ; but she could not help letting me see it, and her agony when she confessed that she had been, as she thought, deceived in you, left no doubt about it."

"What did you say to her?"

"I told her of Mademoiselle de Laurence's marriage, of course."

"By Jove, I had forgotten it ! What did she say to that?"

"It stunned her. She said she felt faint, and

she does look ill, very ill. She went away ; I think she was crying, but . . .”

“ Poor child ! When did Nina get married ? Of course that letter is lost.”

“ No ; it is in my davenport ; I saw it yesterday.”

“ Wonderful !”

“ Shall I get it for you ?”

“ To-morrow morning, please. I think I shall go out for a walk, but I dare say I shall be in again in an hour.”

He went out of the room without giving me time to ask if he forgave my interference, but I was not now uneasy upon that point. I had been successful, consequently I should be praised. My meditations that evening were peaceful enough.

CHAPTER V.

PROBATION.

HE day afterwards, Lifton did not fail to question me at breakfast, as to whether I had brought down that momentous letter of Denton's, and I, who since yesterday had thought of nothing but him and Esther, had not forgotten it.

I handed it over to him without saying anything. I did not feel bold enough to question him, but I longed intensely to know what he intended to do, and he, seeing, I dare say, my wistful look, took pity on me.

"I owe a good deal to you, Phil, for what you did yesterday."

"Then you are not angry with me for going?"

"Not now. I was just at first, because I fancied you could only have done harm, but now I have to thank you for it."

"You need not. It was as much my interest as yours. How could I be happy while you were unhappy?"

"I shall go and see Esther," said he. "It has been a miserable business so far."

"But now it will be all right!" cried I.

"Man proposes," is a saying so disgracefully hackneyed, that I am almost ashamed to write it. I merely wish to observe, respecting the words and their usual sequence, that they are occasionally verified.

When Lifton came back from his visit to the Dower House, he looked sad and dejected. I saw at once that something untoward had happened.

He looked at me as he entered the room, and tried to smile, but the smile would not come, and he did not speak.

"What is it? What has happened? Surely she believes you!"

"I have not seen her."

"You don't mean that she *would* not see you?"

"It was not that. I saw Aldyth. Esther is very ill again. Aldyth is very anxious about her."

I was silent with consternation. Oh, it was surely not going to end in that way. Surely the explanation had not come too late!

"Did you tell Aldyth?" I asked at length.

"Yes; I told her everything, from beginning to end. She is an angel; she said she had seen Esther's coldness for some time, and had wondered at it, and grieved over it, but that whenever she attempted to approach the subject, she was repelled. I dare say she was! Esther *can* repel when she chooses. Aldyth says that if you had not brought about that explanation, Esther would have died rather than allude to her grief."

"I am sure she would; but surely she is not seriously ill?"

"They fear so. I don't know what it is . . . What a noble creature Aldyth Sweynson is! I think, yes, I really think she is the most 'altogether lovely' woman I ever knew."

"Yes, indeed," said I, in a low voice. "I suppose she was friendly to you?"

"Oh, yes; she was most kind. She has made me vain. It is something to be told by such a woman that there is no one she would so much like to have for her brother . . . that was what she said. And what is more, I can believe every word of it. I never knew any one who impressed me as she does with so strong a conviction of perfect, transparent truth and sincerity."

It went to my very heart to hear him do her justice ; the large, ample justice that only one noble nature can do to another. It was not that he had ever undervalued her, or thought of her otherwise than most highly; it was simply that hitherto nothing had occurred to bring them so near together as that each could see clearly the other's worth.

* * * * *

For a week we were in suspense and anxiety. If Lifton and I suffered a good deal during those seven days, Aldyth must indeed have gone through a deep valley of sorrow and care. On the one hand there was Esther, who had a dangerous relapse, claiming all her sister's care and attention. On the other, there was the terrible fear about John Ferriers . . . an awful uncertainty as to whether he might not even then be dead. The next letter that came might be from Edmund, to say, in his calm, "unexaggerated" style, that what she loved was no more, and to tell her that all she was hoping for was quietly resting in death. What sickening throbs of fear must have seized her now and then, and made her very soul faint within her.

At last the danger near home abated. Esther began to recover. The crisis was past. We

need not fear for her life just now, but she was not to be troubled or agitated in any way until she was stronger.

It was then October. The year was again drawing to a close, and the sad and sombre autumn had fairly set in.

Sometimes I thought of the old days of nearly three years ago, and my heart ached, for however really superior the future might be, however wider and better worth living for our sphere, yet those pleasant old days were so fresh, so careless, and could never be lived over again.

During Esther's illness, Lifton, of course, never missed his daily call of inquiry at the Dower House. Every time he saw Aldyth, and sometimes Caroline, who, from all I could hear, behaved with much discretion throughout the whole period, never making a single embarrassing remark, though perfectly well aware of what was going on, as indeed was only natural in such an astute young lady.

She told me afterwards, "I said nothing because they said nothing. I believe poor dear Aldyth actually thought I was blind. I had my revenge afterwards when it all came out, and they expected me to be astonished, instead of which I was only calm, and told them I knew how it would be before any of them."

But that is anticipating. Lifton's probation was not yet over.

Esther, even after her recovery, continued so delicate, that the doctor ordered her away to a warmer climate until she should be strong enough to stand the Cumberland fogs. Aldyth, too, had been dreadfully overwrought, and was experiencing the reaction after all her anxiety and watching. She looked wasted and haggard, and was evidently far from well. Her fresh girl's beauty was gone even now, and the exquisite pathetic beauty of expression which she acquired in after-years, had not yet come to her. Even Harold noticed how ill she looked, and insisted, with blunt kindness, upon her taking a holiday. She should not have the care of the children, he said (grievously insulting Caroline by that expression), they should come and stay at Follyfoot, while she and Esther went away.

So, towards the end of October, the two sisters took their departure for Hastings, where they were to stay at least six weeks. I know that Lifton asked Aldyth if he might not come down and see them, after perhaps two or three weeks, but she begged him to wait, not to come, saying she did not believe any good would come of hurrying things on, and adding that she did

not know how Esther would take it ; she was sensitive, it would be better to wait.

Lifton, having a clear idea of his own intentions, submitted with grace, and we saw no more of them until nearly Christmas.

CHAPTER VI.

A STORY ENDED AND BEGUN.



AFTER this there was no further mystery about Lifton's love affairs. When Aldyth and Esther had come home, and were settled again at the Dower House, he told me one morning that he was going out to make a call, and I knew perfectly well where and for what he was going.

I do not know how long I had been alone. I was reading, and the time passed quickly. I was buried in my book, and hardly heard the library door open. Still, I looked up absently, and was roused by seeing before me both Lifton and Esther, with that in their faces that said very plainly they were reconciled. I knew how it was, and looked at them without a word.

At last — "I have brought you a sister, Philip."

"If you have no objection to another relation," put in Esther, not looking much alarmed as to my answer.

"I cannot but welcome the sister I have waited for so long," was my answer, as I held out both my hands, not caring what either of them thought of my words.

She came to me, put her hands in mine, and kissed my cheek.

"I think we shall always be friends and agree, Philip, shall we not?"

"Unless both our natures change entirely, which is hardly to be expected."

She sat down near me, and Lifton stood beside her chair, looking down upon her.

"So you have walked down here on purpose to let me congratulate you both," said I, laughing.

"Don't flatter us," was my brother's modest reply.

"Oh, I don't know. Caroline will say such queer things to you, that you will need a great deal of flattery, or something else, to counteract her hard sayings. And—if I may ask, when is it to be?"

"*It?*" (from Esther, who blushed suddenly and brightly).

"The wedding," said Lifton, calmly. "Oh, in a very short time—a fortnight or so."

"We can talk about that another time," observed Esther, discreetly. "And now I must go. I told Aldyth I would be back very soon; I came out on purpose to tell you, Philip."

She rose, and gave me her hand, and I whispered to her—

"And about that interview I had with you, when you thought me so very rude; don't you remember?"

"Yes. I have something to say about it, that . . ."

"That you forgive me, I hope?"

"Forgive you—and . . . thank you, Philip, I owe a great deal to you, and now, good-bye."

"If you ask her, Lifton, she will repeat what she has just told me," I called out, as they disappeared.

When the door had closed after them, I sat still, meditating upon what had come to pass, and tried to picture Hoarstones, with Esther always in it. It would be very delightful. I was fond of her—proud of her. I understood the deep, unchangeable love with which she had inspired Lifton, and I approved of his choice entirely and unreservedly.

But . . . in spite of Esther's beauty and

intellect, in spite of the charm that there certainly was about her, I clung to Aldyth—Aldyth, who was the very opposite of the ideal woman I used to picture when I was very young, and read Byron and delighted in melancholy—in that “*heureux temps quand j’étais si malheureux.*” She had grown into my heart, and her gentle, beautiful influence elevated my life, and comforted me in many a moment of sorrow or despondency.

I thought of her now : her sister was happy in her love, and there were for her no weary years of waiting ; no long time of probation ; no hope deferred that maketh the heart sick to age her and sadden her. Whereas Aldyth, although relieved of the dreadful anxiety about John’s life (for news had come that he was recovering), had still no near prospect of being united to him. No definite time was fixed ; it was yet as ever, “a few years ;” perhaps his illness might make a yet longer delay. She always said she had much to be thankful for ; but I know that anxiety was always present in her heart, and that her hours of leisure and relaxation were too often spent in troubled thoughts of the absent ones, and uneasy speculations about their doings and welfare, or ill-fare, as it might be. Yes, the instinct of her heart had

been right—that instinct which told her that the only way of solving the question of John's future, lay in her becoming his wife *before he left* England, and working with him to make a home.

That was the best, the only way of saving the years of anxious suspense. And that way had been barred to her by her position as mother, teacher, guardian, of her sisters. Nobly she filled it, giving her whole heart to the duty ; and she had for her reward . . . But we only see things imperfectly here, and who of us is fit to say what is the best reward for the best deeds ?

Once, when we were talking of great careers and vast ambitions, she said to me : " My greatest ambition is much lower than some of my smaller ones." I knew what she meant. She would have said that while she could understand and appreciate high ambitions and lofty aims, and could sometimes even be stirred to desire greatness and fame on her own account, yet her dearest, best desire was to be loved by one man ; to make one home happy, which thing, could she have had it, would have contented her, though the man had been never so obscure and the home never so modest.

So it happened, that when Lifton returned, I

was thinking, not of Esther, but of Aldyth. But I roused myself to shake his hand again, and wish him joy, and I asked him if he would mind telling me whether Esther had been "difficile," whether he had had to plead very hard with her.

"No," said he. "She has none of that kind of coquetry about her. Once let her own that she loves, and never afterwards will she attempt the shadow of a denial. She had let you see that she loved me; she knew that you would tell me about it; and when I asked if she knew why I had come, she said at once that she did."

"Ah! She wished to make amends for her former distrust."

"Yes. I asked her if she were satisfied with the evidence—that letter—the only evidence I could give as to Nina's having told her falsehoods. She said yes—that she trusted me again, and would never while she lived waver in that trust. And as she said so, Phil, she looked at me in such a way that I almost trembled. It gives one a strange feeling to know that a young, pure woman believes in one almost as she does in God."

I felt something of the awe he described, as he spoke. I also felt, that if any man ever de-

served such trust, that man stood before me now—my brother Lifton.

The engagement was not a long one; they were married early in February, in a rather quiet and unostentatious way. A great fuss and rejoicing did not concur with the tastes of either.

The neighbourhood, of course, said many good-natured things upon the occasion. One party was formed against Lifton, another against Esther.

By the latter, it was said that Esther was a designing girl; not only was she so, but her whole family also. The manner in which she had “thrown at” (whatever that may mean) Mr. Darwin, from his very arrival at Hoarstones, had been, if not indecent, something very like it.

It transpired that her religious opinions were similar to her husband’s (a fact which, after her marriage, she never attempted to conceal); some very kind friends called them worse. “I do assure you,” said one dear old lady, to Mrs. Grundy, “he is bad enough—advanced, they call it, though how they make out a retreat into paganism to be advance, *I* don’t know. Yes, he is bad, but *she* is little better than—an—*atheist!*”

But as another section declared that since her journeyings with the Mostyns, she was merely a Jesuit in disguise, and had married Lifton solely that she might gain over him and his property to the Church of Rome, I leave it to the judicious moralist to judge of the value of either verdict.

The anti-Lifton party said that Harold Sweynson was very much to blame in allowing a sister of his to marry "such a notorious sceptic and free-thinker" as young Darwin ; unless, as an Evangelical clergyman said severely, "he approved, as so many did, in these degenerate days, of sacrificing the immortal soul of a fellow-being to Mammon."

My brother and his wife, however, were in a position that enabled them to laugh at these remarks. The only result of it all was, that after his marriage Lifton was no longer popular as he had been. With one or two families he and his wife were ever welcome guests and fast friends, such as the Mostyns ; but, now that he was no longer free, it was discovered how dangerous his opinions were ; how subversive of all received social and religious order and propriety. He found at home sympathy and appreciation, with intellectual companionship : his wife was not his housekeeper, cook, or seam-

stress (though, had they been in a different position, she would have been all those as well), but his friend, his companion, his fellow-mind. To Esther his friends were always welcome, and, as was natural, she ceased to visit or associate with those who disapproved of him, the more so, as year by year, almost day by day, her views grew more one with his on all questions. Therefore their circle at Campion was small, even in that small and monotonous place ; but beyond, they had a world of love, of interest, of intellect, and beauty, that no one could touch or interfere with.

I believe it caused Aldyth some distress of mind to witness the gradual advancement of Esther's opinions and practice, but her heart was larger and more charitable than her creed, as is the case, thank God ! with most women, or this world would not be worth living in ; and she consoled herself, in some sweet, unreasonable, illogical way, for her sister's shortcomings.

Before we meet again, years will have passed. That Christmas saw us all united : many more must roll away, and when we again see each other some will be missing.

When I begin to write again, seven years, nearly eight, will have passed since Esther's

marriage to my brother. A long time to wait ; but Aldyth had waited, and to the minds of us, who knew and loved her, was better, fairer, kinder, at thirty, than she had been at twenty.

BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER MANY DAYS.



AGAIN we meet, after nearly eight years have passed, and when we have all grown older; some of us sadder, and some of us (it may be) wiser.

Eight rather uneventful years; but they had brought their changes, as so long a time must. Yet, as I write of them they seem to me but as yesterday. Their whole span appears to dwindle and shrink and become small. Yet they were full of life, full of sensation. They passed to us younger ones as slowly as the years of youth always do pass. The time between one birthday and the next seemed to us immeasurable. The years now go faster, much

faster. The goal seems to draw nigh with ever-increasing speed, while our powers grow feebler and our ability for the race less.

At the beginning of those eight years some of us were little more than children; at their close we had one and all arrived at man's or woman's estate, except one, and she had left us. Emma was dead—had been dead for three years, and though she was well loved, yet, except by Aldyth, she was hardly missed.

Eight years had removed Emma, and had brought Harold to the state of a respectable, thorough-going country gentleman, as indeed he always was at heart, but now no one would, should, or could take him for anything else. The same space of time had placed children around him, strong, sturdy little Britons, very like papa and mamma. There are three of them—"Enough, in all conscience," says Caroline, with a sarcastic laugh, adding that suet dumpling, though excellent in its way, is apt to cloy, sooner almost than any other food. Perhaps she was right. Harold and Lucy might be estimable, but they were not interesting members of society; and sometimes I was tempted to extend Caroline's views to themselves as well as to their children.

Robert Sweynson, in eight years, was a (to

me) more agreeable character than either of his brothers. Edmund I had never seen, but I guessed at his disposition. Robert had Harold's frankness and liberality, and a good deal of Edmund's power and concentration of purpose. He had brains and he used them ; he was getting on well ; he had taken a partner (in a business point of view), and the two had, to use Robert's own phrase, "set up for themselves," in Manchester. "He gets dreadfully provincial . . . poor Bob !" Caroline used to say. As yet there was no distinct prospect of the realization of that merchant prince state, to which Bob, in less experienced days, had aspired ; but there was work, competence, hope, and very fair success. Bob, being neither a genius nor a grumbler, was content with his lot, though his active brains by no means intended that lot to be always on the same even level of mediocrity. He looked to rise, and he would rise. So much for Bob. He came home now and then, for a brief holiday, but his heart was in his work, and he was never loath to return to it. There was one very, very vulnerable spot in his sturdy, solid character ; his love for his sister Caroline, the playfellow of his youth, once his adorer, now his tormentor. Poor fellow ! he was so proud of her, and so attentive

to her ; his first question, when he came home, was, "Where's Carrie?" and his last injunction when he left, "Mind you write, Carrie." Her tastes were remembered, her fancies borne in mind ; he was to her what most girls only wish their brothers would be to them. He received little in return for it all ; perhaps, if his love had been returned to its full extent, it might have faded. At the time I am speaking of, (Christmas), he had just been home for a week, and had taken Caroline back with him, to pay a visit to his home in dingy Manchester.

As for my brother and sister, I have not much more to say of them than has already been told, except that there was a son at Hoarstones. Only that one, and if he was very precious it is not to be wondered at—very precious, and a source of much anxiety as well, for if anything happened to him (how far do people allow their imaginations to carry them when they talk about "anything happening" to one they love?) it would be, as Caroline said, with gravity, "a bad business."

They had called the boy after me, Philip, for which attention, Caroline told me, I could never be sufficiently grateful.

I find, on looking back, that I am continually quoting her. It is not surprising. I saw her

daily, and studied, or tried to study, her as often as I saw her. She was ever the same enigma to me. I began to think she always would be one—an unread riddle; a poem in a language I had never heard, and which I did not understand. Whether life were to her farce or tragedy I could not tell: whether it were earnest and solemn, and her cynicism but assumed, or whether it were glad, indifferent, weary, I often conjectured, often fancied I had guessed, and as often found myself in the dark again.

She was four-and-twenty, and was yet Caroline Sweynson; not from want of suitors, but (she said) because she did not choose to marry.

And yet . . . but if I tell my story rightly her acts and her words shall show her, what she was and what she seemed to be, without my trying to analyse what appeared to me her utterly bewildering and contradictory character.

Aldyth . . . was Aldyth; *my* Aldyth, I always called her to myself. At present there was new life in her eyes, and hope in all her movements; for, if nothing happened at the last to thwart his plans, John Ferriers was coming home, was on his way home now, to claim her, and in a few months she would return with him as his wife. After nearly ten

years of waiting, the reward was at hand. They had been faithful, the one to the other, for so long. He wrote to her, if not with the buoyant and vivid hope of the first year, when he had been wilfully blind to every difficulty and sanguine that in three years at the utmost he could claim her . . . if not with that high, untamed hope, yet with love unaltered, manlier, deeper. She said with pride that it was almost worth waiting so long to find so true a heart. I agreed with her, thinking, not of John Ferriers, but of herself, of her heart, which was true as truth itself.

Of other persons I must yet speak a few words. Old Mr. Ferriers was living. He lived on at his farmhouse of Croft Head, with his daughter Cecily. His lengthened years seemed scarcely to have told upon him. He would tell Aldyth when she went to see him, which was once a week at least, that he meant to be present at John's and her wedding, and then, he added, it did not matter how soon he went; he would have lived to see fulfilled his greatest desire.

Cecily was a slender maiden of eighteen, pale, quiet, and silent, as she had always been, with two loves that kept her life from stagnation; her love for her father, and her love for

Aldyth. These two affections she cherished, and seemed to find in them sufficient reason to live and be quietly happy.

Miss Barton lived in London, but there was a regular and frequent correspondence between her and Aldyth, and she often came to stay at the Dower House.

Aldyth and Caroline lived there alone, and when Bob came over he stayed there ; he said that his home was where they were. I, of course, was at Hoarstones ; but no day passed on which they at the Dower House and we at Hoarstones did not meet, one or more of us.

Well, for years now, our lives had run on in a smooth and even course, and even now we thought we knew whither they were tending, and had perfect confidence in the future. That was a mistake. Ought not we, from our very tranquillity, to have augured change ; from our peace to have drawn warning of a storm ? Be that as it may, we lived on, calmly and serenely, as men and women usually do under such circumstances.

CHAPTER II.

CAROLINE ASKS MY ADVICE.



CAROLINE had been absent for three weeks, staying with Robert in Manchester. From her came several letters, some to Aldyth, some to me, which letters Aldyth and I compared; and, although sometimes we could not help laughing, we were oftener sad at things she said. There was a difference in her letters to her sister and to me. Those to Aldyth generally gave amusing enough accounts of what she was doing; and she was, to judge from what she said, by no means dull. Robert had friends, very good friends, in Manchester, who paid a good deal of attention to his sister. She described to Aldyth all her parties, told her what dresses she wore, and gave a general description of the other guests, and her own triumphs, for they were in a manner triumphs;

that is, what girls are taught to consider such—much attention, plenty of admiration and bouquets, and, as Aldyth and I knew very well, in this case, desperate flirting into the bargain.

But to me her letters were different. She took a character or two, those which had most come under her notice during the evening, and dissected them for my benefit—not in the kindest fashion. Her keen eyes were not useless to her. They saw through and through her victims, and in so seeing forgot when they should have been blind.

It appeared from what she said that she had seen much of a certain friend of Robert's, of whom he had often spoken to us, and who was indeed to have come with him to the Dower House on his last visit, had not circumstances occurred to prevent him. This young man, Arthur Wilson by name, was evidently the principal victim to Caroline's fascinations. There was this merit about her, that she never concealed her doings from Aldyth—she was open as the day in regard to her misdemeanours, and would put up with any amount of sermons and good advice, even of reproof and expostulation—but she did not amend; she only laughed alike at the advice

and reproof—laughed, and went her own way.

“Oh!” Aldyth had said to me more than once, “if only she would marry! If I could but see her safely married before I went away!”

“She must, to be happy, marry either her master or her slave,” was all I could say. “She has not yet met the man who would be *quite* her slave, and I doubt whether the man lives who could master her.”

“So do I; but I wish he might appear all the same.”

It was now the end of January, and Caroline had written to warn Aldyth of her intended return in two or three days. At the end of March John Ferriers should be in England. It was not of course decided *when* the wedding should be, but there was a tacit understanding that it would not be delayed long.

Caroline returned on the 1st of February. Of course she did not get in till evening, and we did not see anything of her that night.

But the next morning, as I fully expected, she walked down to Hoarstones to see me. Esther was out with Lifton, so we were alone.

“I am home again,” she said, “ready to torment you as much as you please; and you are not sorry to see me.”

"I am in an indifferent frame of mind at present, Carrie. When I have heard how you have conducted yourself, then I shall be able to tell you whether I am glad or sorry to see you."

"Really! 'How beautiful! 'The Impartial Judge: a Morality. By Philip Darwin, Esq.' I have a strong impression that you will know nothing about it."

"Pray sit down, and don't 'nag' at me, as Mrs. Brown says. In the first place, how is Bob?"

"Bob is well. He desired his respects to you."

"Glad to hear he has any respect for me. And how is Mr. Wilson?"

"Mr. Wilson is as well as can be expected. I have come here to talk about him."

"I know you have. I wonder you have been so long in coming to the point. Poor young man!"

"What do you say that for?" (very sharply).

"Because I feel for any one in such unscrupulous hands as yours."

"Bah! what nonsense! The man is not a baby; he can look after himself."

"Seriously, Caroline . . ."

"No, I never take things seriously. You know perfectly well that it is against my prin-

ciples to be serious. It is seriousness and passion and hearts, and all that sort of humbug, that has brought the world to its present state of muddle. Well, go on. But don't, if you *please*, talk to me about 'seriously.' "

"Then I must not talk at all."

"Dear, dear, what an inconvenient person you are! Go on. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know what you want to tell. I know you are dying to repeat the sufferings you inflicted upon him."

"I *never* die to do anything. 'I care for nobody, no, not I.' Whether any one cares for me, is another thing."

"Quite so. And now for the latest case of caring for you. This Mr. Wilson; who and what is he?"

"What a melodramatic manner! A fine actor was lost in you, Philip. You would not have been tied to provincial boards if you had tried the stage. 'Speak, sister, speak!' Who and what is he? First, who is he? He is a friend of Bob's. His people are rich people. He lives in a jolly big house, and I have been there three times. That is who he is. What is he? A cotton spinner. There's what he is. And the only difference between him and Bob is that while Bob is working for himself this Mr.

Wilson's papa worked for him, so hard that he had no time left to cultivate his mind, nor yet his manners. *Now* you know."

"I knew all that before. And so he was 'smitten' with you, as you yourself would say?"

"Yes. It was very inconvenient. Indeed, I found the Manchester people altogether too energetic for me. He would not, as they say there, 'be said.' And I want to talk to you about it, and take your advice as to whether I should have him."

"*My* advice! That's rich. You, who never take any one's advice, coming to me for that commodity."

"I could trust your opinion."

"Rubbish! You want an excuse to send him about his business, so you think of getting me to advise you not to have him."

"On the contrary, I don't know that I shall not take him. Still, I wished to talk it over impartially, as one should talk of such matters. Aldyth, you see, is of no use in such a case. She would ask me at once what my *feelings* are, and I have none."

"Still at that old tale, Caroline. Now I am not going to spare you. Do you love Mr. Wilson?"

I looked her full in the face as I asked this

question, hoping to catch there a blush, or some sign of the confusion and embarrassment that one would think must come to any girl's face after such a question as that.

But there was none. Her eyes met mine, calm and clear as ever; untroubled; with reflective depth.

"I have often told you that I love no one," she replied. "The question is, could I live with him on good terms, and be comfortable as his wife?" (She did not say "*happy* as his wife.")

"The question is no such thing. If you have no feelings and no love for any one, it cannot matter to you whom you marry, so that he has plenty of money. You could not but be comfortable, because you would not care what happened to him. All men must be alike to you in that respect, I should think?"

"There is some truth in what you say. But he is so very much in love with me. I dislike to be so bothered about things."

"But you have no feelings, so you cannot be bothered."

"Ah, I was not taught logic, but I know what I mean for all that. Now listen. Before I left Manchester, Mr. Wilson proposed to me in a very disagreeable way. He said I had

given him encouragement, and owed him some return for his love. Such rubbish! I have always told you how I dislike people not to take things calmly. Making a fuss never did any good. And *I* am not going to be bullied by any one. He only earned further suspense, for I said I must decline to give him any answer then. I must have time to think about it. He did not like it at all. But I said that unless he agreed I should say No then and there, which soon brought him to his senses again. He is coming here at Easter with Bob, and, unless I can get an invitation somewhere, I shall have to listen to him again, I suppose."

"Caroline, I never heard any one talk as you do. I think you are very wicked, and I believe some day you will reap sorrow from what you are doing now."

"You turning superstitious!" she sneered. "Why I shall hear next that you believe in special answers to prayers for fair weather and the cattle plague, and so on. And I came for some friendly advice, not to be lectured and bullied in this way."

"I can't give you any advice. If you love him, marry him; if you don't love him, write to him at once, and prevent him from coming at Easter."

"That is your counsel, is it?"

"Yes, I have no other to give."

"Well, it is short and to the point, certainly, and sounds very easy."

"It ought to be as easy to do as to say."

"Not to me," said Caroline, suddenly, sighing piteously; and she looked at me so sadly, and with such lonely, weary eyes, that I did pity her from the bottom of my heart, and I believed that I had found at last the secret of Caroline's character.

Hitherto she had lived on in one monotonous round. Nothing had occurred to show her that she was a responsible human being. She had never yet been offered her choice between right and wrong. Some day, I felt sure, the moment would come when she must act—when, by her own unassisted strength, she must stand or fall—decide for good or for evil decisively.

Despite myself—despite my belief in Aldyth's life and teachings—despite the conviction I had always cherished of Caroline's innate honesty and probity—despite all this I trembled for the issue, and dreaded unutterably the time when the crisis should present itself.

"Not to me," she said, and I could not answer her for a time. At last I said,

"Well, I cannot tell you anything else, Caro-

line. I can only say that I wish you might meet a man whom you could not help loving, then you would have no need to ask advice from me or any one but your own heart."

"My *heart!*" (with an incredulous smile). "Well, I shall let this man come at Easter. Listen, Philip! I will confess to having a good deal of sensitiveness upon one point—my companions. It is unfortunate for me, but I was made so, I suppose; and the leopard and the Ethiopian, according to Scripture, have unpleasantly permanent skins. Now, supposing I refused Arthur Wilson—Aldyth marries and goes out to Australia—then what becomes of me? There is nothing for me but Follyfoot. Do you think I could go and live there with Harold, and Lucy, and those children, on a long course of mental roast-beef and suet dumpling? No, it would drive me mad, I do believe."

Her eyes flashed. I had never thought of this before; but now I said,

"I own it would be an unpleasant change from the Dower House, but why not come here?"

"This is not my brother's house, but my brother-in-law's, which makes all the difference. But I can assure you that I have thought and tormented myself no little about this subject,

Why, Harold is so entrenched in orthodoxy and bigotry (he gets worse as he gets older) that he would interfere with the very books I read. Now, if I married Mr. Wilson, I could stipulate beforehand as to what I might do; or I could be married at the registrar's office, and get out of the difficulty in that way."

"There," said I, "you have talked enough about that; let us begin upon another subject. You will stay lunch, will not you? I know Esther wants to see you."

"Yes, I came to stay lunch. Has Esther got that precious child with her?"

"No, he went out with the nurse an hour ago. Do you want to see him?"

"Not I, thanks. But here is Esther; I saw her pass the window."

In a few minutes Esther came in saying,

"Ah, Caroline, I thought you would be here. How did you leave Bob?"

Caroline then had to repeat her news as to Bob, and partly as to Bob's friend, for Esther naturally had heard the news as well as others. Soon after lunch she left, and I remained all the afternoon meditating upon our conversation of the morning.

CHAPTER III.

BLINDFOLD.



DO not think that Caroline told any one but me that Arthur Wilson had actually proposed to her, and that she had given him cause to hope for an acceptance. They all knew that he had paid her much attention, and none of them had any doubt that she had flirted with him, for we knew her ways. And both Aldyth and Esther, when they knew that he was coming home with Bob at Easter, augured that something might come of it. Harold, and Harold only, was not enlightened, not because any one wished to keep the matter a secret from him, but because it would have been impossible to hint anything to him without his immediately wanting to know what it all meant. Did Carrie mean to marry this fellow or not? and why did not the "fellow" write to him, Harold, with other incon-

venient questions, such as only Harolds can put.

So it was allowed to rest, and the month of February passed quickly by, and March came on. Easter was very early that year—Easter-day fell on the second of April. Robert Sweynson and Arthur Wilson were to come to Campion on the Thursday before, and stay till Saturday in Easter week. It was expected that before they went John Ferriers would be at Campion as well.

“It seems as if things always happened at Easter,” said Aldyth to me one day. I knew she was thinking of Harold’s marriage, which, nearly ten years ago, had caused such consternation to her and her sisters.

And so nothing occurred worth speaking of until, on Good Friday morning, Caroline came down to Hoarstones to see me, accompanied by Bob, and Bob’s friend and hers. She introduced us in a manner that made young Wilson stare in some surprise.

“Mr. Wilson, my *particular friend* Philip Darwin.”

Mr. Wilson bowed to me, and I looked at him to see what this new suitor to our Caroline’s hand was like—what manner of man he was. Certainly no girl need have been ashamed of

such a lover ; he was handsome, gentlemanly, and had the air of a man who has seen a good deal, and seen to some purpose. There was everything about him to attract, thought I—even to attract Caroline Sweynson ; and his manner to her was nearly perfect. No one could mistake his deep admiration for her ; but it was so well expressed—not as one sees admiration expressed so often—either so shyly and awkwardly as to be no admiration at all, or so boldly and familiarly as to be the very reverse of a compliment. From the moment I saw him I wished him success ; but in a very short time I saw that Caroline cared nothing for him, at least if one might venture to apply to her any rule relating to most women.

We had a long chat. Robert was looking well and cheerful, and from his manner now and then I could see that he knew—to use his own phrase—“ what was up,” and desired Arthur Wilson’s success.

If the next day was fine, the two young men were going an excursion to Wastwater and back, for Wilson had never seen the country, and was anxious to make the most of his time.

“ Then,” said Esther to them, “ you must come and dine with us on Monday night, and

I will ask one or two other people to come in the evening. I cannot do it before, of course, because it is the end of Lent, and people will not come. Will you tell Aldyth? Ask her to consider herself engaged."

This arrangement was agreed to, and the three went back to the Dower House.

"Well?" (from both Esther and myself, as soon as they were gone).

Esther laughed.

"I like him," said she.

"So do I. I do hope she will have him."

"She ought to think very seriously about it. If she were any other girl, I should talk to her about it, but I know that sermons only do her harm."

"Yes, better leave it," was my answer.

As things turned out, we were a little comforted in the end that we *had* left it.

* * * *

On Monday evening Aldyth, Caroline, Robert, and Mr. Wilson, from the Dower House, and Harold and Lucy from Follyfoot, came to Hoarstones to dinner, but Esther was too sagacious to have them alone. She invited also Frank Leslie, from the Rectory, and the Mostyns. Some others were to come in the evening.

I suppose there are few women with such strong and superior minds as never to manœuvre a little for the pleasure or displeasure of their younger sisters and friends. At any rate, I never met one, and I hope I never shall. Esther Darwin was as little given to match-making or to the encouragement of flirtation, as any one I ever knew, nevertheless she had planned with me in the morning who was to take in who to dinner, and had arranged that Arthur Wilson should escort Caroline, thinking thereby to please them both.

Imagine, then, my feelings when Caroline, just before dinner was announced, came up and seated herself beside me, saying,

"How are you to-night, Philip? If you can walk into the dining-room, I intend to be your companion."

"Thanks, I can walk perfectly well, but I am to take in Mrs. Harold, or, rather, she is to take me."

"Nonsense! Lucy will find some one else, and I am going to take you, as I said before."

"But, Caroline, it is all arranged, and Mr. Wilson is to take you in."

"Is he?" (calmly but firmly). "I knew quite well what was contemplated, but I am not going

to allow Wilson to have his own way in everything to that extent."

"For heaven's sake, then, tell Esther before dinner is ready, or there will be a row. Really, Caroline, I do wish you were not what Mrs. Brown calls '*so contrairy*.'"

"Esther!" said my young friend, beckoning her sister, who was passing, "whom have you given to Mr. Wilson to take in? because I am going with Philip."

"Nonsense!" said Esther, almost crossly, for the most angelic of women may be put out of temper with such a thing as this. It was useless, however, to argue with Caroline. When the time came for each solemn, black-coated man to offer his arm to his destined neighbour, Arthur Wilson had to be polite to Lucy Sweynson, while Caroline, looking provokingly indifferent, stood by my couch, waiting till they had all paired off, when she gave me her hand saying,

"Now come along, and may Fortune be kind enough to place us at the opposite end of the table to that adorned by Arthur Wilson!"

"Caroline! Caroline! have you dashed his hopes to the ground?"

"On the contrary, his hopes are very high, one hundred and twenty in the shade: the monument is nothing to them."

She looked radiantly lovely that night. She was dressed in white, a cloudy, hazy sort of dress, with blue in it somewhere, which, with her wonderful hair and complexion, was the very thing to suit her. And all dinner-time I kept catching glimpses of Arthur Wilson's face, eyeing me with malevolence, to say the least, and Caroline with equal blandness of expression. She talked and chatted to me in a softer and more girl-like manner than usual. I could not understand it at all, and could only conclude that she had made some resolution, or had some hidden reason for her curious proceedings.

Dinner was over, and we were all in the drawing-room again. The guests who had been invited for the evening had begun to come. Amongst them was old Mr. Ferriers, with his daughter Cecily. There was also Doctor Leslie himself. He was now a widower, his wife had been dead several years, and Sybil, the only daughter, had married and gone to live in the South of England.

Aldyth, Mr. Ferriers, and I were talking together in one part of the room. It was touching to see the affection between Aldyth and the old man. She was, and always would be, the daughter of his heart. There was perfect sympathy between them, though it was hardly

confessed, and concealed, on his part, under his usual rough, abrupt manner.

"I am so glad you have come, Mr. Ferriers," said Aldyth. "You really shut yourself up far too closely in that horrid old castle of yours, and Cecily looks pale. You don't give her enough variety."

"Nonsense! Cecily is well enough. I have notions about her, as you very well know. Well, the next time we all meet, my interesting son will have appeared upon the scene, eh?"

Aldyth smiled, and he went on,

"I hear that Miss Caroline is thinking of 'settling,' as they call it, chiefly because it means unsettling, I suppose. Is it true?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Aldyth, hastily. "There is nothing but talk. I don't know whether it will come to anything."

And they glanced across the room to where Caroline was seated, in the company of Frank Leslie and Arthur Wilson, and, it must be written, behaving in a thoroughly reprehensible manner. She had not treated her admirer well that evening; she had hardly deigned him a look or a word, and now, before his very eyes, she was flirting with Frank Leslie, a young gentleman whose heart had got the better of his head, which trait may be accounted for by the

fact that he was a curate. He must be compared to the now classic moth fluttering round a candle, and his powers of hope and endurance must have been long and strong, or he would never have laid himself open to Caroline's tender mercies as he did.

"Dear, dear," said Aldyth, in a tone of distress, "how terribly that girl does flirt to be sure! She makes me quite uneasy sometimes with her wild ways."

The expression of Mr. Ferriers' eye, as it rested upon the young lady, seemed to say, "If I had to deal with that young person, I would not spare her."

Soon after this I noticed that the group (Caroline, Arthur, and Frank) broke up. Caroline had evidently dismissed Frank in a manner which had mortified him sufficiently, and he walked away and began to talk to Cecily Ferriers. Then Caroline, after listening to some words from Arthur, consented to smile graciously, and accept his offered arm, and they went into the hall, no doubt, and from thence to the conservatory. I saw no more of them for nearly an hour, during which time I was fain to interest myself as well as I could in those around me.

I felt that something would be said in that

hour's tête-à-tête, and I could not but wait for the issue. The drama, to me, was one of the intensest interest. I was sure that Caroline, up to now, had never loved young Wilson; or if she had, she had not known it. But I thought that when she found the depth of his love for her (for I saw that it was deep), she might be surprised into love for him. In that event I trusted—for it I hoped.

The others had thought less of the matter than I did. They were all busy talking and laughing; some one was playing the piano, and Caroline was apparently forgotten.

The hum of conversation was at its loudest (amongst "well-bred" people, that means when an amateur has consented to favour the company with a song or a piece of music), when Caroline and Arthur came into the room again.

At the moment I was alone, and I watched them. There was a flush upon his face, a light in his eyes, and a sort of elation in his whole aspect which told of success. She had, then, accepted him? I looked at her, to see if I could read in her face confirmation of the elation in his.

She looked as usual, only her lips were set a little, and her eyes were brighter and harder than was always the case. But when he spoke

to her she smiled, and turned to him with so gracious an air, that I was sure it was as I thought. He had asked her again, and she had accepted him.

But the impression left upon my mind was that she had done it simply because it seemed to her the easiest way of settling her future life. I knew she was tired of her present existence, although she carried off her weariness so well, under the mask of cynicism and indifference. Here was a prospect of change, and she had embraced it, but without either enthusiasm or hope.

I could not rejoice : I pitied her profoundly.

She came to me before the evening was over, and said, without either smile or blush,

"The deed is done, Philip. I am engaged to be married, and it feels as if I had got on a pair of new boots that were too small for me."

"Caroline ! I hope you did not tell your beloved so ?"

"*My* beloved !" (with intense contempt).

"You know we generally do call a person in his position a beloved one."

"Please to make a difference in this case. Doesn't he look ridiculous ? So absurdly happy ; as if he wanted every one to go and do likewise. He reminds me of the man I was

reading about the other day, who ran about the world shouting,

“ ‘Oh that I could make men see
The bliss of being apes like me !’

What capacities some people have for making out bad things to be good ones. If he goes on grinning like that, I really must put a stop to it. I shall have to wound his feelings.”

“ Am I to say anything about this ?”

“ Not till we have gone, then you may tell Lifton and Esther and Philip junior, and every one you like. The sooner everybody knows the better, because then perhaps I shall get to believe in it myself, which I don’t at present.”

So, without letting me say another word, she departed.

When they had gone, I told Lifton and Esther, but I could not call up a smile, nor tell Esther I was glad, and she herself seemed more thoughtful than joyful about it.

“ I am sure I trust it is all for the best,” said she. “ He appears an exceedingly nice fellow, don’t you think so, Lifton ?”

“ I like him very well, very much, I may say. The question is, does Carrie ?”

“ Oh, of course !” cried Esther, looking at him in apprehension.

“ She would not own it, however deeply she

loved him," said I, anxious to take the best view of the case. "It is not in her nature to do so, but I am *sure*" (with much emphasis, as I felt considerable doubt about it) "that she will see his good qualities, and they will be as much Darby and Joan as you two."

Whereat Lifton and Esther laughed.

Very soon all the little world of Campion knew of Caroline's engagement. Harold's consent was given, and at the end of the week Arthur Wilson went back with Bob to Manchester, as he believed, a supremely happy man.

CHAPTER IV.

DESTINY ?

 OHN FERRIERS had not yet arrived when Robert and Arthur went back to Manchester. His ship was due; she was two days behind time; but no anxiety was felt on her account, for it was known at the owners that she was safe.

Any day we might hear of John's arrival in Liverpool, any day he might turn up at Campion.

Aldyth said nothing of the anxiety she felt all that time. But I could read it in her unquiet manner, in the occasional trembling of her hands, and in the absent, inward look of her eyes.

For my part, I awaited the arrival of John Ferriers with no little impatience. Aldyth was dearer to me than any woman in the world;

and, believing as I did that there could hardly be a man in the world fully worthy of her, I felt more than curiosity to see this man, to whom she had been faithful for so long. I longed for, yet dreaded his return; for after arrival must come departure, and when he departed would not she depart with him?

At last, one morning, Caroline came to me with a look of excitement quite unusual and strange to her, and then I knew that they had had news.

"He will be here to-morrow afternoon," said she, eagerly. "Aldyth has had a telegram. He wants her to go and tell his pa that he is coming, so she's going to Croft Head after lunch."

"Dear me!" was all I could say. "Is he coming to the Dower House?"

"I don't know in the least; the telegram only says to-morrow afternoon. How I long to see him!"

"What for?"

"To see if he is altered. He used to be the nicest fellow. Ah, he was a handsome man. I have never seen any one half so handsome as he was. But, of course, he will look old and ugly now, for he must be four-and-thirty—yes, he is four years older than Aldyth. What a poor spirit Aldyth has, to be sure!"

"What do you mean?" I asked, savagely, for her tone exasperated me.

"If I had been in her place, do you think I would have let him go alone? let him work by himself all these years, and then tamely wait till he came to fetch me? No; I would have gone with him, and every step of progress that he made should have been one-half due to me."

"And, in the meantime, you would have left your brothers and sisters to scramble on at home, and grow up as best they might, while you sought adventures in Australia. Charity begins at home, and so does duty; and Aldyth was braver to stay than she would have been to go."

"Oh, you are infatuated about Aldyth. I will go. I cannot listen to such nonsense. Good-morning!"

And she marched away with dignity, leaving me to communicate the news to Esther when I thought proper.

Here was yet another phase of her character for me to explain if I could. Could there be in her mind some feeling of jealousy that Aldyth's long and patient waiting for her one love was to be crowned so soon with joy and completion, while she, choosing out of her many lovers, had yet no love and no romance,

but cold, monotonous, and insipid feelings in the midst of her triumphs? Who knows? I only draw her as she seemed to me. Let us follow her. She went home to lunch, and when that was over, Aldyth ordered the phaeton to go to Croft Head, on her message to Mr. Ferriers.

"Will not you come, too, Carrie?" she asked. "I am sure it would do you good. You have hardly been out at all."

"No, thanks. I prefer home to the company of that old bear."

Aldyth frowned. Few things roused her to active displeasure, but to speak of old Mr. Ferriers in that tone, or indeed in any tone of disparagement, was one. Therefore, she did not answer Caroline, but went upstairs to get ready for her drive. When she came down again she did not go into the drawing-room, but was getting into the phaeton, when Caroline, hearing the opening of the door, came out to her, saying,

"What do you mean by setting off in that way without telling me?"

After which she became very busy with shawls and rugs, and professed great anxiety that Aldyth should be properly wrapped up, for though it was April it was cold and raw—that

morning snow had fallen, and, to judge from the sky, would fall again before night.

When Aldyth had driven off, Caroline returned to the drawing-room, which of course she had to herself. Drawing an easy-chair close up to the fire, she placed herself in it, leaned back, and sighed.

She made no pretence of taking up either book or work, but simply lay back, staring into the fire, one slender white hand supporting her cheek. It was her left hand, and on one finger was her betrothal ring.

What was she thinking of? I cannot tell. She was the strangest being it was ever my fate to know; and sometimes, surely, she must have had strange and weird thoughts. It could hardly be that her mind was altogether like the minds of other women.

She may have been thinking of her engagement—she may have been thinking of her lover . . . what she thought of him I have often wondered. This I know, that she never had the least love or tenderness for him.

I believe it was a luxury to her to have an afternoon so utterly to herself, in which she could look as sad, as absent, as careworn as she chose, without any one remarking upon her dulness and want of spirits.

It was her whim, or her pleasure, always to affect callousness and indifference ; to declare, as she had done to me a thousand times, that she had no feelings, and so on. But, whatever foundation of truth there may have been to it all, I have no manner of doubt that part of it was assumed. She said she could not love, and that she had no heart, simply because she never *had* loved, and did not know what a heart there was in her breast. She would laugh at the manner in which lovers were absorbed in each other, and say that passion was all humbug ; for her own passions had never yet been roused, and she little knew, poor thing ! to what they would hurry her when they were.

In a word, she professed and believed to be guided and ruled solely by reason, and not at all by feeling, and up to this time, till she was twenty-four years old, she had acted up to the very letter of her profession. She became an apostate afterwards ; not the first, nor the last, even to better creeds than hers. Like that great French lady, long ago, she had carried her scepticism "*jusqu'au dernier doute,*" and, like her, she had to be awakened with a shock.

She had sat there, musing, or calculating, or philosophizing—who knows what ? for nearly

two hours. It was four o'clock. The fire had burnt low and hollow, but it was hot and glowing; the cinders crinkled now and then with a metallic, tinkling sound. The timepiece ticked on in a muffled sort of way from its well-fortified position on the mantelpiece, and for the rest there was perfect silence in the house.

Then came the sound of wheels, and a ring. But Caroline, though she heard both in an instinctive kind of way, hardly noticed the sounds: it was Aldyth returning, no doubt, and she sat still, without giving herself the trouble even to turn her head.

The doors and walls at the Dower House were thick and solid, like those of most houses in that chill and stormy country. And on this cold, winterly day they were all shut fast, so that Caroline, deep in her reverie, heard nothing unusual in the hall.

Silence again for a few moments. Then some one opened the door, and a footstep startled her from her dream, for it was the firm, heavy tread of a man, not Aldyth's light foot-fall.

Roused at last, she started up, pushed her chair back, and rose to see who was thus announcing himself, never doubting it to be Harold, or perhaps Lifton.

It was neither. A tall, bearded man, browner, and more weather-beaten than is the wont of home-staying Englishmen. There was something rough about his appearance; there was something imposing, too. She stood looking at him for more than a minute; wonder, surprise, vague, confused memories thronging thick and fast upon her mind.

He, too, was silent, looking at her in very much the same way. If they had met in a street or a crowd they would have passed each other without recognition; but now, after the first few moments of bewilderment, memory did her work—they knew each other again.

Caroline spoke first, coming forward a little, but looking very shy; she certainly had never looked so shy before Arthur Wilson.

“It cannot be you . . . John?”

“I believe it is. And I must believe, also, that you are Caroline, I suppose. But . . . it is very strange.”

“And Aldyth is not here!” exclaimed Caroline.

“Not here! What do you mean?”

“She has gone to Croft Head, to tell your father that you are coming to-morrow.”

“Then I may not hope for a welcome, as I come a day too soon?” said John, smiling.

"Oh, you may, indeed! I beg your pardon! I was so surprised . . . so amazed. I am very glad you have come."

She held out her hand, but he took them both and held them fast, looking into her face with eager, loving eyes.

"Oh, Caroline! ten years I have waited, and now to come back and find you so changed! Good heavens! have you all changed so much that I shall not know you? If it be so, I have waited too long."

In the old days he would have drawn her to him and given her a kiss—indeed at first it had seemed natural to both that he should do so now, and then a veil seemed suddenly to be dropped between them, and he only held her hands and looked at her still.

There had been emotion in his voice, and he paused before he could go on.

"If you knew how I have counted the weeks and days and hours to this time!"

"So has Aldyth!" observed Caroline, whose usual *savoir faire* had entirely deserted her.

"Aldyth! Will she be long? I will go after her. That cabman fellow will not have gone, but if he has, I will walk."

What was it that possessed her to say, quickly,

"Oh, no, you must not do that; you must stay here, or else you may miss again. Aldyth cannot be long now, and as soon as ever she comes, we will send for Mr. Ferriers, and he will meet you here. And I am forgetting. Have you had anything to eat to-day? When did you leave Liverpool? You would like some dinner?"

"Nothing. I could eat nothing now. I can't do anything till I have seen Aldyth."

"It is too wonderful!" said Caroline, "but you have not told me even yet why you are here to-day. Sit down; I will make up the fire."

She pulled an easy-chair up to the hearth for him, heaped coal on the fire, and then drew up her own chair and said,

"Now tell me."

"I telegraphed to Aldyth from Valencia. The vessel was in half a day sooner than was expected. We arrived last night, instead of at noon to-day, so I was able to come on this morning, and I did not think it needful to send another telegram."

"No," responded Caroline, looking at him, and owning to herself that he far exceeded any man she had ever seen, in what were, to her, the essential attributes of manliness—that is,

strength, grace, dignity, and the something else, the quiet independence which sits so well upon the man who has worked his way up, through toil and difficulty, to a position of ease and serenity.

What must he have thought of her in the same moment, flushed with excitement and pleasure, touched for the first time to the very heart with joy and admiration? She was not the same woman, but another and a more beautiful one.

They sat by the fire talking fast. Caroline made John talk about himself, and show me the man or woman who is coy about that. She was full of enthusiasm. She found in the history of his struggles and perils, the substance, the life she so lacked and so desired, in her quiet, luxurious, well-protected existence.

She listened, as though she would never be tired of hearing, and so it happened that John never asked after any one but Aldyth, not even his father, and Caroline's head never once turned towards Edmund, who was left behind, alone, but they sat, absorbed in one another, forgetting time, place, circumstances; forgetting everything but the intense pleasure they felt in looking at each other, and speaking to each other.

Half-past five had struck, before the second ring announced Aldyth's return. Caroline started up, blushing crimson, from some unstated, unstateable cause.

"Stay where you are!" she said, hurriedly, "I must go and prepare her. She will be so terribly startled if I do not."

The last words were almost lost, as she sped out of the room, and left him alone.

The maid was just opening the door, as Caroline appeared in the hall.

"Leave me to tell Miss Sweynson, Mary," she whispered. "I will open the door to her."

The servant retired, and Caroline opened the door, seized Aldyth's arm, and drew her in, saying,

"What a time you have been, Aldyth! I have been dying for you to come. Come in here, I have something to tell you."

Therewith she pulled her into the dining-room.

"What is it?" asked Aldyth, startled and alarmed, as she suffered herself to be led by her imperious sister.

The contrast was great to any eye that only looked at the outside. Beside that blooming, radiant beauty, Aldyth looked sad, faded,

careworn. Any great emotion sent the blood from her cheeks, and left her pale and startled.

"John said he would be here to-morrow," gasped Caroline, preserving some sense even in her excitement.

"Have you heard from him again?"

"His ship got in half a day sooner, and . . . Aldyth, don't look so frightened . . . why were you not here? To *think* of your being away at such a time!"

"He has *come*?" she exclaimed, catching hold of Caroline's arm.

"Yes he has; he came an hour ago. Oh, Aldyth, don't go to him till you are all right."

"All right! What can be wrong if he has come back?" asked Aldyth, with a strange, excited smile. "There, Carrie, I will go to him. Is he in the drawing-room?"

"Yes. I will not go back again. Dear Aldyth!"

Caroline, with these words, threw her arms round Aldyth's neck and kissed her, a thing so strange that Aldyth noticed it in the midst of all the tumult in her own heart and mind.

Then, without another word, Caroline went upstairs, locked herself into her own room, and cried heartily.

Strange, inexplicable nature ! Perhaps it was some instinct of evil that told her to be sorry, and not glad, that Aldyth had been away from home when John came back.

CHAPTER V.

THE MEETING.



ALDYTH had loosened Caroline's arms from the clasp they had taken round her neck, with a movement, not rough, nor repulsive, but most decided and irresistible. John was there, in the house, within a few paces of her : those paces must be quickly passed, and she would be with him, would see him, would feel again the pressure of his hand, after all these years.

It is true that the pangs and joys of years may be concentrated into a few seconds. As Aldyth passed across the hall, and into the drawing-room, she lived over again nearly every day of the years she had been waiting.

She opened the door, felt, rather than saw, that he was there ; knew by instinct that his arms were outstretched to receive her, as he, too, sprang forward to meet her. In a moment

she was clasped close, as close as she had been on the day they parted.

They met silently. The strength of their joy drove every word from their lips back to their hearts, as we feel our breath hurried from us when a wave washes round our throats.

So, in a long, straining, silent embrace, they stood, only knowing that they had met again, that parting was over, and their long separation was at last crowned with perfect joy.

It is a dreadful thing that grief should, generally speaking, be so much more real and lasting than joy.

“First our pleasures die, and then
Our hopes, and then our fears, and when
These are dead, the debt is due :
Dust claims dust, and we die too.”

Such words and such thoughts were farther from no minds than from theirs at that moment. It was afterwards that they both felt that there might be such things as death, loneliness, and desolation. It was long before they spoke, but when at last the spell of silent ecstasy was broken, they had much to say ; who can doubt it ?

What they spoke about I cannot tell, for I do not know. They remained talking, in low murmuring voices for more than an hour ; they

would have stayed there all night, no doubt, forgetful of all the world except each other, if Caroline had not at last come to the door, and knocking, told them, without coming in, that dinner was waiting for them. Then, with a long sigh, they rose, and Aldyth said,

"I had forgotten your long journey, and your weariness, John, in my selfish delight."

"No weariness now, Aldyth ; but I ought to go to my father, he must want to see me, only, you know, it was impossible for me to pass the Follyfoot gates without coming to see you."

"Your father will forgive you," said she, smiling. "I have been talking to him all the afternoon, and so missed your arrival."

"Do you know, Aldyth, when I came into this room, and Caroline turned to me, I felt, I cannot tell you what, or how ; I had a confused idea that it was *you*."

"Oh, I am not in the least like Carrie ; she is young and beautiful."

"She *is* beautiful, most beautiful," he replied, earnestly. "Somehow I have always thought of her as the yellow-haired school-girl I left behind me. She used to be fond of me, I believe, in those days."

"Poor Carrie !" said Aldyth.

It seemed to her just then that every one but

herself must live in such a sombre and shaded valley of life, must see so little sunshine, and know so little of what true love and faithful service meant. They passed into the dining-room, where Caroline waited for them.

John looked from her to Aldyth. At that moment Aldyth looked as young and more lovely than her sister, as was most natural, for her nature was so much more tender and womanly and lovely than Caroline's, and her joy had brought back the old flush to her cheek, and the old, soft, shining light to her eyes.

"How I pity poor Ned!" was John's observation as he seated himself.

"Goodness!" cried Caroline, "I entirely forgot to ask about him. Is he as lively and affectionate and enthusiastic as ever?"

"Oh, Carrie! Dear Ned! I have forgotten to ask about him, too. Did he send letters and messages, John?"

"Well, he said, as I was coming, there was no need for him to write; but about a fortnight before I started I took him by brute force (nothing less would avail) to a photographer's, and made him have his likeness done. He said it was imbecile, and idiotic, and puerile, and many other pretty things, but I was firm, and would not let him off."

"How very good of you. Is he very much changed?"

"Not so much; he isn't a fellow to change much; he is brown and sunburnt, though, as I am."

"Has he modestly concealed his lovely face in a beard the size of yours?" inquired Caroline, "because if so, it was not of much use taking him to have his likeness done."

"No, he doesn't go in for a beard. By the way, Caroline, you have grown very like him."

Both the sisters uttered a protest against this opinion, and said it was utter nonsense to imagine such a thing, but John persisted. . . "Not in feature, nor complexion, nor anything of that kind, but in expression," he said, decisively.

Of course they both smiled incredulously, remembering Edmund as he was when he had left, a lad of nineteen, with only the germs of his hard and sombre character visible, and thinking of Caroline, in connection with him, as a child of fourteen, forgetting that he was now nine and twenty, and she four and twenty, and that in ten years one who has been absent may find startlingly strong likenesses—likenesses of which those who stay at home never dreamt.

"I sent a note to Mr. Ferriers," said Caro-

line, "to say you had come, John, and asking him down to dinner, but he sent for answer that he would drive down in the evening, and you could go back with him."

"Then I dare say he will be here soon," said Aldyth. "After all, I believe it is better that we should have missed at first, because we shall all meet together this evening."

It was about half-past eight when Mr. Ferriers came. They were all three in the drawing-room, with the lamps lighted, and tea on the table.

The father and son met without demonstration. It was not in the nature of either to be effusive; both had the true Britishman's dread of a "scene" as fully developed as even Harold himself.

Therefore a hearty hand-clasp, and some quiet words, full of meaning, was all that passed. Mr. Ferriers showed his satisfaction by kissing Aldyth two or three times instead of once, and observing to his son that when he was young, a son would have come to seek his father, and not left his father to seek him.

To which John only replied by looking at Aldyth with a smile.

They sat there talking, hearing and telling about what had happened in all those years, the

thousand little things which in letters are almost of necessity passed over.

There was the story of John's and Edmund's station ; their wild bush neighbours, their many perils, and thousand narrow escapes, to all of which the three hearers listened with intensest interest. Caroline, having put off all her affectation of indifference, hung on every word that fell from John's lips.

Then there was the tamer history of the lives of those left at home, at which Caroline waxed impatient, and pished and pshawed often, but which was full of interest to John, who had been exiled from it all so long.

"I *cannot* believe in Esther's being married and having a son," said John, laughing. "It seems too ridiculous, too absurd."

"You had better not say so to Lifton," remarked Caroline, dryly. "He is infatuated about her." (According to Caroline, great love or regard was always "infatuation," and she ever spoke of it as such.) "They go in for intellect and advancement, and all that kind of thing, and have scandalized the faithful of this neighbourhood no little by having people to dinner on Sunday, playing croquet on the same blessed occasion, and never going to church."

"And Cecily?" said John. "If she has advanced at the same pace as the rest of you all . . ."

("But she hasn't," murmured Caroline, aside.)

"She must be quite a young lady."

"She *is* 'quite the lady,'" said Caroline, laughing.

By the time that all these histories were over, it was getting late, and Mr. Ferriers rose, saying that whatever John meant to do, *he* must go.

Whereupon John rose, too, and said he supposed they must leave.

"But you will come again to-morrow?" asked Aldyth, earnestly.

"Trust me, Aldyth," he replied smiling, and taking her hands to say good-night.

So ended the first evening of their reunion. Well, that at any rate had been to Aldyth a time of perfect happiness. She could always look back upon that one evening without a pang.

Somehow Caroline's engagement had not been mentioned. Every time the conversation had in any way seemed turning towards her, she had changed it adroitly.

But Mr. Ferriers, on their way home, did

happen to mention it to his son, in a casual way.

"How lovely Caroline has grown," observed John.

"Beautiful, attractive, fascinating, perhaps," said his father, "but to me, John, there is nothing about her either lovely or loveable."

"Whatever makes you think so?"

"I don't *think* so, I have come to know it from long and close observation. She is hard and polished and cold, a flint of a woman, and what possessed that young Wilson to engage himself to her I cannot tell, for she does not care two straws for him."

"Caroline engaged? What do you mean? To whom?" ejaculated John, in a blank voice.

"Did not they tell you?"

"No. When did it happen? It must have been quite lately."

"Oh, yes, at Easter. Bob brought over this friend of his, and Miss Caroline had seen him before in Manchester, and managed to turn his head, so while he was here the business was finished . . . she took a whim into her head to accept him, and make a public fact of the engagement. What it will come to, heaven only knows."

“ But why do you speak of her in that way ?” demanded John, somewhat nettled.

“ Because I don’t trust her. She has never lived for any one but herself, and she would not hesitate to sacrifice her best friend to herself, if necessary.”

“ I can’t think it,” observed John, who of course saw very clearly in his own mind how impossible it was for such a lovely creature to do anything but what was graceful, womanly, and good.

“ Of course you can’t think it, my dear boy, I don’t expect you to think it ; but I have not lived so long for nothing, even up at Croft Head, and I would not trust Caroline (to use a vulgar saying) any farther than I could see her.”

To this no answer was returned. It appeared to John that his father was wantonly insulting his new-found friend, and he thought, with a kind of indignant pity, how easily old people, living in remote country places, get rusted and prejudiced against everything novel or progressive, forgetting that, in the matter of society, he had been in a much more remote district for ten years than even his father.

By the light of the moon they drove up the

mountain road to the old home of his boyhood, and he was very silent. No doubt many thoughts and memories crowded upon his heart as he recognized the old familiar outlines of the fields and hedgerows, and of the gray moors and mountains in the distance, now sleeping under the solemn, peaceful moonlight.

As they drove in through the old wooden gates, he turned to his father and said,

"Father, it is very good to be at home again, and to know that I have never, while I have been out there, done anything that, if you knew it, could make you not wish to welcome me back."

For answer, Mr. Ferriers laid his hand upon his son's shoulder, and said,

"Yes, John, it is well, very well, but remember what you have had to keep you from going wrong . . . that girl who has waited for you so long. He must be a good man who is worthy of her."

"I know it" (in a low voice).

That night John Ferriers slept in the small chamber, where, when he was a boy, he had kept his miscellany of boyish treasures—his birds' eggs, and fishing-rods; his bats, balls, and pistol (priceless treasures of a boy's life!),

and the hundred odds and ends, so inexplicable to ordinary intellects; so intelligible, so valuable, and so comfortable to their owners—
lads.

CHAPTER VI.

BETWEEN TWO LIVES.



HERE I make an instinctive pause. This is not, and does not profess to be the history of any mystery. All here is clear and simple ; there is no mystery except that which the human heart ("deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked," if we are to believe a certain cheerful old person who writes in the Bible) makes for itself. I only tell what happened to people that I knew, at a given period of my life and theirs. Much of it, I know, is not worth telling, except to them and to me.

Till now, if in the life-cup of one or two of us there had been some sadness, many fears, great anxieties, yet there had never been any great agony. Nothing had occurred to make any of us mistrust our fellows, or look with cynical and suspicious eyes upon mankind in general. No

one's faith or trust had received any great blow, no one's hopes had been ruined, but rather fulfilled. Yes, Time had dealt kindly with me and my friends.

Romantic adventures, great troubles, unheard-of adversities, are charming to read of. It is delightful when one is warmly clad, comfortably housed, easy in circumstances, serene in mind, to read about the agonies of imaginary fellow beings, to watch the strugglings and kickings and prancings and twistings . . . in *print* . . . of puppets like ourselves.

For my part, though the utmost agony that I have yet endured has never been for my own wrongs or sufferings, but always for those of others, yet I can safely say that the broad road of ease and prosperity, and freedom from care or trouble, whether it lead to destruction or otherwise, is the road for me. I have never had to strive with unhappy love, poor circumstances, ill treatment, myself, but I have known others who have, and it appears to me that most—not *all*—of them would have been better and happier men and women if they had been spared those trials.

It is useless to protest against and deny the great fact that humanity in general is better, more generous, more wholesome, in weal than

in woe, is oftener soured than sweetened by "carking care," is more philanthropic, more energetic, more philosophical when rich than when poor, and has more sympathy with, more love, and more help for its fellows in joy than in grief. That I do believe to be true of humanity in general. I am quite aware that my opinion may be not only disputed, but refuted, which does not, however, induce me to promise that I will cease to hold it as soon as it has been proved to be absurd.

I also hold that there are some rare, high, sweet natures, that improve with adversity and trouble. It has been my happiness to know one or two of those also. If such were not few and far between, "like angels' visits," why should we write their histories when we have known them, and say, "Behold, how excellent!" They suffer, yes, they must suffer here, as we more earthly natures can hardly understand. So little do we know of the workings of these souls, that when, after their great tribulations, they can again return to work, and to bless the world with their pure influence, some of us are found ignorant enough to say, "Poor things! they have had great troubles, but, fortunately, not being very sensitive, they recover the shock. A wise Providence always arranges these

things." If this sounds oracular and vague, it is merely because I know the end, and have been contemplating it, half bitterly, half sadly, before beginning to write of it.

"The beginning of the end," I suppose one might call the return of John Ferriers. If he had known what was in store for him and others, I wonder if he would have come?

I was naturally very anxious to see him, and Aldyth soon brought him to Hoarstones, introducing us, and saying to John that I was her valued friend.

I felt a spasm of sorrow as I thought how soon we were to be separated, most likely for our lives, for I was sure that when once Aldyth had gone, she would never return.

I looked, then, very earnestly at John Ferriers. To me he was no common man, for Aldyth loved him, and had been content to wait for him all these years. There was, I confess, some unacknowledged jealousy in my scrutiny. I was sure that there must be something worthy in him, but I looked, I must say, more to find out his defects than his perfections.

I was not very successful. He was the handsomest man almost that I had ever seen, and there was about him a strength and force which, if more vigorous than polished, was yet

eminently becoming to him. A man who had lived his life had, of course, no drawing-room graces. He did not speak in a softly modulated voice, nor with anything of an elegant expression ; his words were to the point, blunt, shrewd, and uncompromising, but there was a dignity about him, arising, I suppose, from self-reliance, and a sense of being thoroughly the right man in the right place ; a dignity which redeemed him from being either vulgar or loud in the very slightest degree. With all his bluntness and all his want of finesse, there was a charm about him. I could understand Aldyth's love for him, but . . . but . . . I told myself it was meanness, spite, and jealousy on my part, to think that there was in him some quality wanting, what, I could hardly say, but it struck me that in something he was deficient. Whether it was his sense of moral responsibility that came short, and gave his eye its occasionally inconsequent and absent look, I could not tell. To me it seemed that there was something wanting, and I racked my brain to find out what that something could be. It could not surely be in stability of character that he was deficient, for he had waited faithfully all these ten years, as faithfully as Aldyth had done. Afterwards I found out what it was. John Ferriers had a

weak will. All these years Edmund Sweynson, not he, had ruled. John could act under orders, but he could not organize, he could not originate actions. He had more need than most people to say very fervently, "Lead me not into temptation," when he prayed. So far he had been preserved from temptation, that was yet to come, and would he rise above it, or yield to it and fall ?

Of one thing I was soon assured, Aldyth was as devoted to him now as ever. She had never shirked a duty nor neglected a trust ; she had carefully and lovingly dealt by her sisters ever since they had fallen to her charge. All this without complaining, even to herself, I am sure, but her true life, her real existence, was bound up in this man ; she had been sustained all these years by the knowledge that she had him and his love over and above all other things, and now it seemed as if she rested a little from the old life before beginning the new.

When he had been home about a week, it was decided that the wedding should take place in July, and that they should leave England immediately after it was over. John could have stayed longer if necessary, but he was anxious to be back at his work, and Aldyth desired to help him in all she could, therefore it was

decided that the marriage should not be later.

One afternoon, nearly at the end of April, I had gone to the Dower House to see them, and found Aldyth alone. She was writing to Bob, but put aside her pen when I came in.

"Philip, I am glad to see you," said she, kindly. "It seems so long since you paid us a visit."

"I came, because I cannot but think how soon you will not be here, and I shall have no one to come and see. You are alone?"

"Yes; Carrie and John have gone out for a walk. I sent them out; I wanted to have a little quiet. They have so much to say; they are always laughing and going on about something, and I am so old and sober, you see . . ."

She smiled so brightly as she spoke, that even my jealous watchfulness could detect nothing but content in her manner.

"You old, indeed!" said I, "you are younger now than any of them."

"You foolish boy!" she answered, laughing, and looking pleased.

"Oh, Aldyth, what shall I do when you are gone? How shall I get on without such a friend as you?"

"I will write to you by every mail."

"Write! What is writing? Every letter that comes will only show me how more and more firmly fixed you are in your new home; how more and more impossible it will be for me ever to see you again; but you will not care; you will have everything you wish for, and you will be happy."

"Philip, we never have everything we wish for. If I had all I desired, I would never live anywhere but at Campion, and I would see you and speak to you every day of my life. Do you think I am giving up nothing in parting from my home? Think of the years that will have to pass before I can make that my *home*, even with John. Oh, Philip, you have greatly mistaken my whole character and heart if you think it costs me nothing to leave all this."

For the first time there dawned upon me the full width of the chasm that was to separate us, the greatness of the distance that would stretch between us. The gay voices, the careless talk of marriage and union, seemed to die away in echoes and hollowness, and there was nothing left but silence and aching separation, for her as well as for me. It would truly be "Division" . .

"I say 'return!' but she cannot follow,
She cries 'come over!' I cannot come;
We speak, we laugh, but with voices hollow,
Our hands are hanging, our hearts are numb."

It seemed for a moment too dreadful, too like an oppressive dream. And when I looked up and saw the familiar figure of my friend and teacher in the midst of her own peculiar surroundings, I told myself that it could never be . . . that this was her place, that we could not be going to part, and for a moment I believed myself, and was comforted.

We did not speak again about this subject, however, we both felt it to be dangerous ground. But we turned to Caroline's future, and I asked where she would go till her marriage, after Aldyth's departure.

"To Follyfoot, I suppose. I only wish she were going to be married before I leave. I have ventured to hint it to her once, but she behaved most strangely ; she went quite pale, and told me never to speak of it, as she does not mean to be married yet."

"Do you think she really loves him, Aldyth?"

Aldyth shook her head sadly.

"I do not know ; she never speaks of him to me. It was so different when Esther was engaged. I cannot tell what I have done that my sister should put so little confidence in me. It grieves me very much."

"She will not stay long at Follyfoot," I ob-

served. "It is utterly uncongenial to her ; she will be married soon, if only to escape from it."

"She is not in her usual good spirits at all ; she is fitful and uncertain ; now gay, and almost wild, then sullen, and always saying such strange, bitter things : you know her way."

"Whatever she does," I said, blindly, "I shall always be her staunch friend. I have never understood her yet, but I have trusted her, and do. She nearly always comes to me for advice, and after you have gone, I shall advise her as I think you would."

"I know you will always be kind and good, Philip. Dear me ! do you remember when you and Lifton first came to Hoarstones, and our meeting at Lancaster ? How little we knew that we should be so bound up together in all our hopes and fears and affections."

"It was the best day of my life when I met you, Aldyth."

"I wish you would not exalt me as you do !" said she, uneasily. "I am as weak and feeble as any other woman, Philip. If real trouble were to come upon me, I could not answer for my actions. Suppose I were to be called upon to act in some great crisis or emergency, and were to do something unworthy or mean or

weak—which is just as likely as not—then how you would suffer from my unworthiness.”

“No, I should not, because you would not be unworthy. I believe you worthy, not unworthy, consequently I believe that your acts would answer to your nature. Don’t try to run yourself down, Aldyth, you only make me more obstinately cling to my own opinion.”

“I see you are obdurate and blind.”

“I believe, on the contrary, that I am a person of great penetration and insight into character.”

At this moment Caroline and John came in from their walk. Caroline’s expression instantly struck me . . . she looked dark and gloomy. There was no smile upon her face, and she hardly spoke when she gave me her hand. It was not late, and John begged Aldyth to go with him into the garden for a turn. She agreed, and they went out together, leaving Caroline and me alone.

“Where have you been?” I asked. “Have you been out long?”

“About two hours. It is rather nice out.”

“Yet you do not look as if you had enjoyed yourself.”

“Did I say I had enjoyed myself?”

“I thought you liked John Ferriers so much?”

"Humph!"

"I have been talking to Aldyth a long time. We have been talking about you part of the time."

"About me? What have you been saying about *me*?"

"Aldyth wishes you would be married before she goes to Australia."

"I won't be married before she goes to Australia, nor after either, unless I choose."

"Dear me! you need not be so savage about nothing! *I* don't care whether you marry or not."

"I know that. You don't care a straw for me. Nobody does. I am alone."

"What rubbish! What about Mr. Wilson?"

"Oh, I had forgotten him."

"Promising for his future happiness!"

"Philip!" (haughtily and angrily), "I will have no impertinence, even from *you*! Mind your own business."

"I will; I will go away at once. *Good-afternoon.*"

And taking my stick, I walked to the door, found my phaeton waiting, and took my departure, saddened, in spite of myself, at Caroline's changed looks.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEREIN BONDS ARE BROKEN.



AS time passed on, Aldyth, engaged in preparations for her marriage, was in the house a good deal. John, who came down every day, was told that Caroline would amuse him, with which arrangement he always professed himself satisfied, although Caroline herself occasionally made some demur.

Sometimes they came down to Hoarstones, and would pass the morning or afternoon with me or Esther, or with all of us. In the evening they were scarcely ever alone. Sometimes they were at Follyfoot, sometimes they would go up to Croft Head, but oftener they used to have visitors, or people dropping in at the Dower House, old acquaintances and friends, who were anxious to see John while he was over, and who, now that the prospect of Aldyth's depar-

ture actually stared them in the face, were eager to make the most of the short time left to them, in which to see her and say farewell.

Often, in the glorious summer evenings, a party of them would set off for a long walk. John and Aldyth and Caroline; Esther and Lifton would join them; sometimes even Harold went, and Frank Leslie from the Rectory. In these walking expeditions I, of course, could take no part; but they generally ended in a meeting of every one at Hoarstones, when the walks were discussed, and much laughter and nonsense took place. They would tell me how beautiful the shore looked; how the sun set red and stormy over a heaving purple sea; how the mountains stood out so clear and distinct in their prophecy of coming rain, that you could almost see the stones upon them. Or, how they had wandered over the upland roads, and gathered heather, white and purple and crimson; had found the delicate harebells blowing on the thymy cliffs, and brought home bunches of deeply-flushed dog-roses, and yet more lovely sweet-scented white ones, that grew in trailing, lowly beauty, upon the very ground.

Alas! To this day I have a little bouquet, dried and faded, that Aldyth put into my hand one night with a smile, after such a walk. Two

or three wild roses, some harebells and heath, a few leaves of ivy, and a blossom, white and beautiful, of the little wild strawberry, that grew so profusely in all the hedges.

"The honeysuckles will be in full bloom and sweetness when I am gone," said she, "and when you see them you may think of me, for they are my favourites."

"Thinking of you will not bring you here to enjoy them," I answered, sadly.

At first I used almost to enjoy it all. Sometimes Caroline puzzled me with her fitful ways, and alternate kindness and indifference, but Aldyth looked so happy and content, that I had not enough selfishness not to be rather content, too, even while I thought of the price I must pay in the security of her happiness.

This calm serenity of life, however, even with the few drops of regret lending their little acrid taste to it, was heaven, paradise, in comparison to the state into which I shortly afterwards fell, by reason of a dread suspicion which took possession of my mind, and would not be ousted thence, do what I would.

At first I tried to thrust it from me, shuddering, and with a chill of fear on my own account, lest I should be going deranged in letting such an idea enter my head, for, said I to myself,

"surely none but a madman could have conceived such a thing of his old friend."

Very fine, but I could not reason it nor frighten it away, and at last I found that I must not fly it but face it, and to face it I must watch two of our party, those two . . . can you guess who they were? . . . Caroline and John.

That I should have to write it! Yet worse than any writing of it was the dreadful thing itself. If it were true, what mattered much whether it were put into black and white or not?

I had had an uneasy, wretched consciousness for some days that all was not smooth, but I would not, even to myself, allow it to become a formed idea.

The day, however, came—one of the black days of my life—on which I was forced to see that one half, at least, of my vague fear was not only not without reason, but that my fear had not shadowed forth nearly the full extent of the mischief.

These things progress silently, growing and increasing in the hearts and heads of those most nearly concerned, with a rapidity of which we outsiders know nothing, and then, when the whole ugly truth is laid suddenly before us, we are startled and shocked. I was.

It was June, "the leafy month," and one afternoon some of us were in the garden at Hoarstones. Esther was reading. I had had a couch brought out and placed under a spreading sycamore. Lifton was there, too, now making a pretence to be reading, now teasing Esther—for he was as prone to that as ever—and Aldyth was there, too, occasionally lecturing Lifton a little for his schoolboy propensity.

Caroline and John had been sitting on the grass, near to Aldyth, when Caroline, without speaking, rose, and walked to some distance from us, pacing about a broad terrace, alone. John looked after her lazily, but admiringly. It had been evident to me all along that he did admire her extremely, but in a friendly, kindly, Platonic sort of fashion, at least so I believed, and I had good cause for thinking myself right, inasmuch as he never wavered in looking at Aldyth. He was as devoted, as attentive to her as on the day of his return, and in his eyes, when they met hers, there was nothing to conceal, no uneasiness, no *arrière pensée* that he would not wish her to guess at.

So far, so good.

The time was about half-past four, and soon after Caroline had left us so abruptly, a servant came, bringing the cards of some visitors.

Esther rose, saying she must go to them, and adding, persuasively,

"Come, Lifton, don't be lazy, you must come with me, too. Do your duty to society for once."

"That means that you want to show off your husband," said Lifton, laughing, for he knew Esther's weak point, her inordinate vanity about him. In this weakness she and I were about similarly affected.

He got up from the grass, however, and with a laugh offered her his arm, when Aldyth said,

"I will go, too. I should like to see Mrs. G. and her daughter before I leave England."

So the three went into the house. John Ferriers and I lay without speaking for some minutes. I was watching Caroline with much interest. She was walking quickly and impatiently up and down the terrace, with drooping head and clasped hands. I could not see her face, but her attitude was one of dejection. Suddenly, as she turned she looked towards us, and seeing that we were alone, came to us.

"Where are the others?"

"Gone in to be polite to some friends. You had better go to."

"Not I! I am in no humour for being polite to any one this afternoon."

"Why, Carrie," remarked John, looking up at her, "you look quite cross. What is the matter with you this afternoon?"

He was lying on the grass, as I have said, and she stood near him, looking down upon him gravely, unsmilingly, sternly.

Long she looked, and then broke into a laugh that had no mirth in it.

"How lazy you are! I challenge you to find me in the garden. Before you can get up and look after me, I shall have disappeared."

So saying, she walked away very quickly. John sprang up and followed her instantly, and I was left alone for some quarter of an hour, at the end of which time I was nearly asleep, but suddenly awoke with a start at the sound of voices near me.

Half confused, I could not at first make out whose they were; I could not see the speakers, because of a large clump of laurels and rhododendrons, which projected upon the lawn, and the speakers were on the other side of them.

In a moment, however, I recognized the voices—those of Caroline and John.

"And why will you not do as Aldyth

wishes, Carrie, and be married when we are?"

"Don't ask me!" (in a tone of genuine distress, almost of terror), "I cannot do it, John. I shall never be married, never."

"Then why did you engage yourself?"

"I was mad, or imbecile. At any rate, I did not know what I was doing. Oh, if I could only escape from this wretched place! It stifles me."

"Carrie! What do you mean?"

"Oh, *you* know nothing about it, how should you? You are satisfied. I wish I had to wait ten years for some one. I wish I had something to do that no one else could do. If it were even to kill some one, I think I could do it to escape from . . ."

Such a sigh followed these words as I had never heard before. It came from a heart at once sick of itself, and despairing of any more hopeful life.

"You do not know how unhappy it makes me to hear you talk so," said John, kindly. "Aldyth is unhappy about you, too."

"Why are you always prating to me about *Aldyth*?" she asked, fiercely. "There is no need for it. I know quite well what a pattern of virtue and perfection she is." (Here there

was an unmistakable sneer, which made my blood boil.) "I have not been able to live in her society all this time without finding that out."

"Good heavens, Carrie!" (with sudden inspiration), "you do not love Arthur Wilson?"

"*Love* him!" (scornfully), "no; did I ever say that I did?"

"How dreadful! You are the most extraordinary girl I ever met."

"I'm not a girl; I am a woman of four and twenty. I have the strongest objection to that practice of calling single women 'girls,' till they get to be a hundred or so, and treating them à l'enfant. It is revolting!"

"I beg your pardon. You are a very singular woman, since you prefer plain speaking, and I think you would be too exacting ever to really love."

There was a pause of a full minute, and then Caroline said, in a trembling voice, which tried, with sorry success, to be as mocking as usual,

"What a deep perception of character you must have! *I* not able to love Good heavens!"

I echoed her exclamation with dismay in my own mind, thinking, "It is the worst, the very

worst that could have happened. She loves with the strength of despair at last, and loves *him*. May he never know it!"

"But . . ." began John, in a puzzled voice, and then he stopped short.

I trembled. There was silence for a moment, and then I heard a sob. It came from Caroline's lips, the lips that I had never yet known to do anything but laugh, scornfully, bitterly, drearily, it might be, but laugh always.

Then John's voice, low and greatly moved,

"My God, Caroline! What must I do? My poor child!"

Had she betrayed herself? She could not surely have been so wicked, so reckless, so lost.

Yet . . . John would be proof against it all. His heart was fortified with a truer, firmer, more enduring love than hers. I felt that it must be hard for him, too . . . how could he be harsh to such a criminal, to such a crime, as that? Not harsh, but firm, surely.

"Have you nothing to say? Do you scorn me utterly, and cast me aside?" she asked, with more of apprehension than fierceness in her tone.

"Heaven forbid! Caroline, you know that I do love you . . . as my sister."

"Your *sister*!"

"What would you have?" (In a voice of the utmost pain and distress.)

I could hear that she started from him.

"Go to Aldyth!" she exclaimed, in a voice choked with passion and wounded pride. "You think she knows how to love, but I tell you she does *not*. She no more knows what love is than Philip Darwin, or that wooden post. She is a prude, a thing without heart or soul in her love. Oh, if she had felt as I do, she would have been a better friend than she has been."

"You must not go on like that," said John, quickly, and I knew he caught hold of her hand. "Carrie, would you have me act like a dastard; lose my honour and my honesty; desert *her* after all this . . . and I loved her, too?"

What, was it come to the past tense already? Would heaven permit this sin? Still, he might have spoken so as not to mortify Caroline too keenly. Her quick sense noted the changed expression, too, and she said,

"No, no, I was mad, I *am* mad. I have undone myself. Promise me you will never . . . never . . ."

"What do you take me for? Do you suppose that I would ever utter one syllable of what has passed? No; it will die with me, Caroline."

"You will forgive, me ? You can afford to do that."

"Forgive you ! May God never forgive me if I ever think evil of you, Caroline. I am your brother and friend as long as I live."

"Ah, you are generous!" (in a cold, constrained, dead sort of voice).

And then, to seal their fraternity, no doubt, he gave her one kiss, and they went away, Caroline saying,

"Take me to the house, and I will go to them in the drawing-room, and say you are waiting for . . ."

The last word must have been "Aldyth," but I did not hear it.

They passed out of hearing without coming near me, and I suddenly awoke from what seemed like a bad dream, to the knowledge that it was no dream, but the solid truth, and to the consciousness that for the last half hour I had been playing the thankless part of a voluntary listener.

I did not pause either to justify or blame myself ; I was too sick at heart with what I had heard, to think much of *how* I had heard it.

At that moment it seemed to me that the sun was blotted out, and the brightness vanished from the trees and flowers. What had been

light was dark . . . my soul, and the shadow over it, were the reasons why.

The whole evening almost had passed before I was able to comfort myself with the reflection that, after all, John Ferriers was not a base coward. Granted that Caroline was infatuated to such an extent as to let him know her feelings, he was too firmly entrenched in his love for Aldyth, which had been part of his life for ten years, to be led away even by the witchery of knowing that he was loved passionately by Caroline Sweynson, beautiful, witty, fascinating though she were.

The comfort was cold, but such as it was, I had to content myself with it.

CHAPTER VIII.

LAST WORDS.

T was in the middle of June, that unlucky afternoon on which I had overheard the conversation of Caroline and John. Can it be a matter of wonder that, after that day, I should watch them intently, whenever I had the opportunity? I found no pleasure in my self-imposed scrutiny. I was in a fever of anxiety every time I saw them, lest I should be struck to the heart with some expression of understanding between them, some sign that the parting words of that memorable day had not been final ones.

For some time I saw nothing except that Caroline was so utterly changed from what she had been before her engagement, that many people would hardly have recognized her.

She moved about slowly and unwillingly. She, who had never been still for an hour, was

now languid and listless, and would sit in silence with book or work, as a pretence of occupation, for hours, neither reading nor working, but with dull, indifferent eyes, looking upon the familiar scenes of home.

How we missed the wild spirits of former days! the gay laughs, the merry sallies! nay, we would have given a good deal to hear even the satire and sneers which we had once deprecated. *That* time, however, was now passed for ever. She would never be as she had been, and I knew it, but, with the others, I lamented the sad change. Only I and John Ferriers, beside herself, knew the reason of it, and at last I saw that his attention was arrested; his eyes dwelt uneasily upon her, full of a certain apprehension and trouble. How I dreaded to see that expression change to anything else. And at last it *did* change. The day came, when to my inexpressible anguish, I knew that John Ferriers had fallen, that he had not soul enough or manliness enough to put aside his tempter with a strong hand, to endure and make her endure some short sharp pain at present, so as to secure entire peace and calm hereafter.

His fate was in his own hands; his choice was free, for good or for evil, and he chose the evil.

So with Caroline, though she suffered anguish of mind and soul, to which that of John Ferriers was as nothing, simply nothing.

It is Charles Dickens, I believe, who has said that if we knew the histories of most great sins and crimes, we should find that the struggles of the criminal were *towards*, not *from* his crime. And I believe this to be true. At least, I am sure of this, that Caroline Sweynson and John Ferriers, when the first barricade of concealment had been broken down, when the idea that to think a second time of their love was permissible . . . when this had come to pass, the rest of the conflict was not to raise great barriers of justice, honour, virtue, between them and their desire, but to demolish those barriers; they did not try to turn their backs upon the thing, and thrust it from them; they turned their faces towards it, and strove passionately to reach it.

"Love and duty," or, in their case, passion and duty . . . and the fight was, not against obstacles towards duty, but to break the cords which long custom had taught them to consider duty.

It is always presumptuous in an outsider to think of indicating the beginner of such a wrong as this; yet it comes over my mind with overwhelming strength of conviction, that if

Caroline had not let John know her love for him, he would never have been disloyal to Aldyth. I believe, too, that Caroline knew this herself, and when she had got what she wanted; when John's heart was alienated from her sister, and when she knew that all his thoughts and all his passion were for her alone, then she was more wretched, in her uneasy, feverish triumph, than almost any woman that ever lived.

I watched it all with grief, that deepened day by day . . . watched the wretched girl shrink from the caresses and cares of her unsuspecting sister . . . watched the sick look of utter misery that settled upon her face whenever she believed herself unobserved. What would be the end of it all? I hardly dared to ask myself. I dared not venture to answer myself, but tried to stop short at the present; tried to hold the veil of uncertainty down with both hands, and not open my eyes, not see behind it.

Aldyth, every day more busy and pre-occupied, saw nothing, suspected nothing, and I *dared* not utter to any one a word of the dreadful truth. Lifton and Esther were equally blind, because they, like every one else, looked upon the pre-arranged order of things as im-

mutable. Aldyth was to marry John, and go out to Australia. Caroline, sometime or other, would be the wife of Arthur Wilson, and go to live at Manchester. Such was the aspect of things in their eyes, and it never entered their heads to question the fulfilment of it. I, only I, from my helpless, invalid solitude, looked upon the men and women around me, and knew the truth.

One day, when I had been thinking with painful persistency upon this subject, I suddenly remembered my interview with Esther, and I wondered if any words of mine could turn Caroline aside, even for a time, from her present course. Perhaps I was hasty in resolving to try what I could do, but I made up my mind to the effort; and, as fate would have it, Caroline came to Hoarstones that afternoon, alone. Esther and Lifton were both out, and I believed that my time had come.

How was I to begin? I could hardly greet her, or answer to her listless inquiry as to how I was. On my mind was one thought, and one only: till I had uttered it, I could give my attention to nothing else.

"Where is John Ferriers?" I asked.

"He is gone up to Croft Head, this afternoon, and is going to bring Cecily back to dinner."

"So, being deprived of his society, you have recourse to mine."

"What do you mean?" (looking at me defiantly and coldly).

"I mean this, that you are behaving in a thoroughly dishonourable and base way to Aldyth, to John Ferriers, and to yourself. I have watched you ever since he came home, Caroline, and I know too much."

"How dare you take upon yourself to watch me, or any one connected with me? The fact is, Philip, you are much too ready to give your opinion upon subjects that you do not understand. You do not know your place."

"As to that I differ, and it will be of no use to argue the point with you. But as to my not understanding what I speak about . . . Shall I tell you what I *am* speaking about, what I am alluding to?"

I looked at her intently as I spoke, resolving that she should not escape my scrutiny. For a moment she was silent. Then she looked at me, and said coldly—

"Yes. Pray let me know what you have been discovering. As the spelling-book says, 'What can you do with your eyes?' I am all attention."

I had heard Caroline say many bitter things,

in very bitter tones, but I had never heard anything so dreadful as this. The poor attempt at a sneer; the vain effort to speak in a voice of sarcastic indifference, were, to me, in spite of the anger I felt against her, most pitiful. But I would not spare her, and I said slowly, watching her face at every word,—

“You have done your utmost to draw John away from Aldyth, and make him in love with yourself . . . Now you have succeeded . . . you have done to your best and truest and kindest friend, what will go near to break her heart, if ever she knows it, and I do not see how she is to help knowing it some time. Is not that enough? You could not be content to flirt with every man you meet, but you must make your sister’s lover false to her. I honour you, truly!” I concentrated as much contempt as I could into my voice, as I spoke these words.

“You think *you* understand it,” said she, scornfully. “I tell you, Aldyth never loved him. She doesn’t know the meaning of real love.”

“Not if that consists in making a man false to the woman he has engaged himself to,” I answered cuttingly. “I quite agree with you there. She has some ridiculous antiquated

notions about honour and womanliness : it is a pity, as it seems they have been of no use to her, even as an example to her youngest sister."

"Take care! You will go too far. I will not hear much more."

"Suppose I tell Aldyth."

"Suppose you do. What good will it do to you, or her, or any one else?"

I could not answer her, and she knew I could not.

"I hope you will not be so utterly bereft of human heart as to make him break off his engagement."

"Make him? You talk in a strange way. Women do not *usually* propose."

"*You* began it," said I, forgetting, and passing the line I had laid down in my mind, as being the utmost limit to which I could go. "It was your fault. If you had not led him on, it would never have happened. If you had chosen you might have prevented it all. He knew you were engaged, and he would never have *thought* of falling in love with you. I hope you may live to repent of it, and be punished for what you have done."

She had risen, and stood over me, her face white to the lips with passion.

"If I were a man," said she, "I would *kill* you. No one shall say such things to me; not my own mother. Philip Darwin, I will never speak to you again! never! as long as I live."

She turned upon her heel, and walked out of the room.

And through all these years that have rolled by . . . since that afternoon I have never seen her, and never spoken to her.

She was wrong; she was wicked just then; I had lost much of my love for her, but when she had gone I wept—yes, wept for grief to think that two friends had parted so. And to this day I cannot think of her without anguish. For so many years we had travelled life's road, if not together, at least side by side, never far from each other; and now she had left me, saying she would never speak to me again. It was the worst grief that had ever come to me.

I began to think sadly, that though my infirmity prevented me from taking active part in the affairs of men, yet that it did not exempt me from their griefs and sorrows. And that the blow should come from Caroline Sweynson!

There had been a time, a few years ago, when, if no such person as Aldyth had existed,

I could have loved Caroline ; but the higher nature claimed me ; I gave my allegiance to it, and now I thank God that I could do so. But none the less did I feel this stroke, the more so as my heart, despite its anger against Caroline, was at the same time wrung with pity for her. It was not a weak nature that had fallen ; she had a strong nature, and she would suffer in proportion to her strength. I repeat it : her choice had been free at first. If her passion were strong, so was her will, and if her will had been rightly used it would have conquered.

I find, when I begin to write about her, that I could cover pages in trying to find analyses of the motives which led her to act as she did, and that is foolish, for after all the explanations and analyses in the world, this simple fact remains, that she loved where every consideration of honour, honesty, duty, and affection bade her stifle and conceal her love ; and instead of concealing it, she made it known, and used her power successfully, to lead a man from the straight path of duty and honour. But, since Aldyth has forgiven her (and him, too, I know), I can afford to say, "Peace be with her--as much peace as she can ever know."

And so I parted from Caroline.

CHAPTER IX.

HAROLD BRINGS A MESSAGE.



THAT afternoon only marked the beginning of dark days—sad days. Now that Caroline had declared war against me I was for many days without seeing any one from the Dower House. I did not go there, and I dreaded, with an indefinable dread, to hear any news from either Aldyth or Caroline. Alas! the news came from neither of them.

There came a day; it was the first of July, a sultry, close summer day. In the garden everything was still, and there was that peculiar feeling out of doors and all around as if Nature held her breath in preparation for some coming crisis, which should shake her out of her torpor, and bring her to life again. I had spent the whole morning out of doors, and after lunch had gone out again, taking mine ease upon the

grass, and lazily perusing a sweet and musical poem of Jean Ingelow's. I had finished it for the third time, and was still repeating in my mind the lines,

“ And dark against day's golden death
She moved where Lindis wandereth,
My son's fair wife, Elizabeth.”

The first drops of a thunder shower began to fall, in large, cold tears upon my face, so, collecting my books and taking my crutch, I went into the house. The storm was heavy and violent, and when it was over, the rain, instead of ceasing, continued in a steady, serious way that said, as plainly as weather can say, “I have come to stay a while.”

At the Dower House Aldyth was alone. Caroline had gone out immediately after lunch, saying she should take a walk, and then go to Follyfoot and call upon Lucy, a thing she was not fond of doing; “but,” said she, “it is my duty, and I will.”

“Do not go very far,” urged Aldyth, “I am afraid it is going to rain, it looks very dark.”

“I do not care for the rain,” was the response, and she walked away to get ready, looking into the drawing-room on her way out, to say,

"Aldyth, if it does come on wet I shall stay at Follyfoot all night."

"My dear Caroline! What a strange thing for you to do," cried Aldyth, who well knew her sister's intense aversion to Follyfoot and all the inmates thereof.

"I have a reason," said Caroline, impatiently, "so good-bye."

"Good-afternoon, dear."

The thunderstorm did come; the rain continued, as I have said, therefore when Caroline did not appear at dinner-time, nor during the evening, Aldyth was in nowise uneasy, but pictured her listening to Lucy's gentle meandering stream of conversation about babies, servants, Mrs. Grundy, and the last quarrel between the churchwardens and the high and low church schism, which bade fair to rend the peaceful village of Campion with intestine war, and bring the most violent faction fights into what had once been the most united congregation in England.

She was alone, but, as she said to me afterwards, not lonely, because she had so many thoughts . . . happy ones chiefly; and if a few were regretful, the regret was not the worst of its kind—that for wrongs done, it was only for friends and scenes to be left.

The next morning was brilliant after the rain and storm. Through the open windows came the scents of mignonette and roses, greeting her as she took her solitary breakfast. It was ten o'clock, and she was yet at the table, reading the morning paper, for their habits at the Dower House were rather late and lazy ; when Harold walked into the room, trouble, dark and sullen, written so unmistakably on his face, that her fears were instantly aroused.

"Where is Carrie ? Is she ill that she has not come back ?"

"Come back ! She will not come back very soon."

"What do you mean ? Where is she ? Is it about her that you have come ?"

Harold looked around him as if he would have given all he possessed to escape this thing ; not to have it to tell. He said, slowly,

"Yes. About her, and . . . damn them both !" concluded Harold, who in this crisis could think of no better way in which to vent his anger and distress.

"*Who ?* Harold, Harold !" She got up, and taking hold of his arm, looked at him. "Tell me what you mean. Don't do it in this way. What is it ?"

Her voice was full of terror, for this trouble

was an utter mystery to her, and gained horror a hundredfold by that very fact.

Towards the truth her mind never once glanced for a second; this he saw, and felt his task a hard one indeed.

"I can't tell you," he said, bluntly; "I cannot do it. You must read it. Here's her letter."

He handed her a letter directed to himself, in Caroline's handwriting.

With hands that shook so as to be nearly useless Aldyth took out the letter. It was not a long one, but it was to her one of those death-blows that may come to heart and soul as easily as to body.

"DEAR HAROLD,

"Aldyth thinks I am at Follyfoot, staying all night. I was obliged to tell her so because I did not want her to know where I was going.

"I am going to be married to John Ferriers. When you get this we shall be in Liverpool, and it will be of no use sending after us, for we shall be married before you can come to us. We start for Australia the day after to-morrow (Thursday).

"Perhaps I shall never meet any of you again . . . Who knows? I know you will think very hardly of me, but remember . . . we may never meet again. I do not try to

justify myself . . . I know that would be of no use ; and after all, Aldyth is the only person who is sinned against. Tell her . . . tell her nothing ; her own heart must tell her what to do.

"Farewell ! You will believe nothing good of me now, therefore it is almost useless for me to say that I wish you all at Campion more happiness than I shall ever know.

"CAROLINE."

"I don't know what it means," said Aldyth, pushing the letter away from her when she had finished it ; but her horror-stricken face, white to the lips, told a different story ; the blow in its descent had gone home, and had struck her to the ground.

"I don't know what it means, Harold," she said again, sitting down, folding her hands, and looking into his face, hopelessly and helplessly.

"Poor Aldyth ! poor girl !" was his answer, in a husky voice.

Of all his sisters he loved Aldyth the most and Caroline the least, and his character was of the kind most calculated to misunderstand, or, rather, to fail of understanding at all, such a deed as this of Caroline's. To him it appeared wholly base, mean, and unpardonable ; and he

could not understand that there could by any chance be condoning circumstances about it.

At the pitying words a light seemed to break upon Aldyth's stunned mind. Was it she that he was pitying, and calling "poor Aldyth?" Why, a day ago she had been as happy as any woman in England. She put her hand to her head, and tried to take it in, saying over and over to herself silently,

"Caroline and John have gone away together. He does not love me any longer, and they are going to be married. *She* will be his wife, not I."

But the idea made no impression upon her mind; it was as if she said nothing. Harold began to walk up and down the room, feeling himself utterly helpless in the presence of this dreadful fact. He had told her, and she neither wept, nor exclaimed, nor did anything but say that she did not understand it.

As he beheld her sitting there in her desolation his anger rose, and carried him away from himself; he stopped before her, and said, in a rough, broken voice,

"I understand it, Aldyth. I understand that John Ferriers is a scoundrel, and your sister Caroline a wicked, unprincipled woman. I will never see her nor speak to her again. She has

sown, and she shall reap accordingly. I wash my hands of her."

Aldyth had loved Caroline so dearly, in spite of her unresponsiveness ; she had been to her as a mother, and it hurt her to hear Harold say such words, even now.

"She has sinned, Harold ; but do not say you will never see her nor speak to her ; you do not know what may happen."

To Harold, this seemed puerile and wire-drawn : to me, it seems nearly sublime.

"If I could see her in her coffin, I would, gladly. I do not own such as she for my sisters. If she had died when Emma did, it would have been a happy day, both for her and us."

"Oh, hush !" she cried, and began to weep.

He came and sat beside her, and put his arm around her. She leaned her head upon his shoulder, clasped her arms round his neck, and said,

"Ah, Harold ! my place was here. I did wrong to love any one but you."

"Nonsense, Aldyth ! How were you to know that the man was a villain ?"

This jarred upon her. Calling John a villain, and Caroline an unprincipled woman, did not cure her ill nor heal her wound, but rather *added* to them.

She was silent, and Harold presently said,

"I wonder if I could stop it even now; it may be only a blind to keep me from going."

Then she started up.

"That is the last thing in the world to do, Harold. It would ruin her reputation, and do me no good. Do you suppose that I would marry him, after this? What must you think of me?"

"Ruin her reputation! She has not much heed to her reputation, or she would not have done this."

But Aldyth could talk no more. The truth was beginning to dawn upon her; the agony began to make itself felt.

"I cannot talk about it, Harold. I must be alone. You have been very good to me. I know you feel for me."

So saying, she rose, and went slowly upstairs, entered her room, and fastened the door. She did not leave her chamber again that day, nor would she admit any one into it. When they knocked, and begged her to let them come, she said she wished to be left alone, till at last they ceased to tease her, and went away.

Harold, having fulfilled the worst part of his task, left the house, and wended his way through the wood, and across the brook, to Hoarstones.

He was going to tell Esther, and ask her to go to her sister.

Esther, Lifton, little Philip, and I were in the library, when a servant came and said that Mr. Sweynson wanted to speak to Mrs. Darwin in private.

"What can that mean?" said Esther, after the man had gone. "I never knew Harold do such a thing before, and he knows that I shall tell Lifton afterwards."

I could not speak. I was sure that the blow had come at last, and my thoughts flew to Aldyth at once.

Esther went to Harold, and I said to Lifton, "I am afraid I can guess what it is, Lifton."

"You—why, what do you think it is? Any trouble?"

"If it is what I think, it will be trouble indeed. I believe Harold has come to say that Caroline has eloped with John Ferriers."

"Is the lad out of his mind?"

"Wait and see."

In ten minutes Esther came back, ran to Lifton, and began to cry.

"My dear child, what is it? Has Harold gone?"

"Yes, he has gone, poor fellow! He says he

cannot face any one this morning. Oh, it is too dreadful!"

"What is too dreadful? Tell me, Esther, my dear."

"Caroline has run away with John Ferriers, and is going to marry him and go to Australia. What *will* poor Aldyth do?"

"The scoundrel!" muttered Lifton.

"Harold wants me to go and see Aldyth; and of course I will, at once. But, Lifton, I never heard of such a thing. I never suspected it for a moment, did you?"

"Never. And her own engagement. Young Wilson will be half wild."

Indeed, the consternation at Hoarstones was terrible. Esther went at once to the Dower House, but her visit was fruitless, as we know. To-morrow, Aldyth said she would see her, not to-day.

It had come at last, the stroke that had been impending ever since John Ferriers came home in April. I could only wish all kinds of vain and impossible things, and wonder how Aldyth felt.

CHAPTER X.

ALDYTH.

HE day afterwards Esther saw Aldyth. On her return, she said Aldyth was perfectly calm, and had scarcely alluded to John or Caroline. "But," added Esther, "she looks years older, and I am sure she is suffering frightfully."

The day after that I called in the afternoon, meaning just to leave my card, and show her that I had her in my thoughts, but I was told that Miss Sweynson would like to see me.

I followed the maid to the drawing-room, with a feeling akin to awe.

She was there, but I hardly dared to look at her. It seemed to me that some great change must have come over her. I knew that poor Caroline's only plea for herself, "Aldyth does not love him," had no truth in it, and that she

had loved him devotedly, from the very utmost depths of her nature.

"I expected you, Philip," was her greeting. "I knew you would not fail to come to me when I was in trouble."

She had held out her hand to me as she spoke, and I seized it and covered it with kisses, saying, in a broken voice,

"Aldyth! Aldyth! my heart is breaking for you. Yet I try to think that you were saved from marrying him because he was not half, nor a quarter, worthy of you."

"No, no!" she said, bursting into tears, "it was not to be. I was not too good; but I should have known that ten years make more difference in a woman than a man—change her twice as much. And I might have remembered that people always fall in love with Carrie!"

It nearly broke my heart to hear her speaking thus.

"Poor things!" she added. "They will suffer terribly. They were not wicked, but weak. Did you see Caroline's letter? I gave it to Esther."

"I have seen it," I answered, dryly.

"Philip, that letter was written in agony of mind. When I read the last words, I could be angry no longer . . . when she wished us to

have more happiness than she would ever know I know what she means by that."

I could not answer this.

Aldyth had a little book upon her knee, and she now showed it to me, saying,

"This book was my mother's. She guided her life by it almost. I have been reading it, and it says things that are so true. If I had only studied it more! See!"

She pointed to some passages. The book was Thomas à Kempis' "Imitation of Christ," that book written in sadness and compunction of heart, by an unworldly old monk, which yet appeals to us all, however frivolous, however lost in the inconsequent little nothings which in these days we call "life." This was what she showed me :—

"The cross, therefore, is always ready, and everywhere awaiteth thee.

"Thou canst not escape it whithersoever thou runnest, for wheresoever thou goest; thou carriest *thyself* with thee, and shalt ever find *thyself* . . .

"Thou art deceived, thou art deceived, if thou seek any other thing than to suffer tribulations; for this whole mortal life is full of miseries, and *signed on every side with crosses.*"

There was the germ of truth at the bottom of

all this, which makes so many mistaken ideas almost impossible to be overthrown. I did not agree with it; and yet, after what she had just gone through; after this new page of human nature, which she had just been so reluctantly learning, how was I to argue against her idea?

"I do not know how it is," she went on. "I can speak to you of this with less pain than I can to any one else. I think it is because you understand me better than the others; better even than Esther. You will have your wish, now, Philip—I shall always be near you; and I shall have mine—always to stay in Campion."

Her voice as she said this, was too utterly weary and grieved to be bitter.

"I was a fool ever to utter such a wish," said I, savagely; "it will rise up to rebuke me whenever I see your face."

"You must not let it do so. My future will not be what it should have been, but I shall always have . . . my brother Philip."

I dared not speak, I could not trust my voice; we were, therefore, silent for a time, and were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Aldyth, and a maid entered, and put a note into her hand, saying the messenger waited for an answer.

She read it, looked agitated, and said,

"Tell him to go back, and say I will come at once," and then she gave it me to read. It was from Cecily Ferriers, and said,

"DEAREST ALDYTH,

"My father was dreadfully shocked with the news of John. He was taken ill yesterday, and to-day he is very, very weak. I do not think he will get over it. He keeps asking for you, and I think you will come to him, for you know how he loves you. I am in great trouble. Will you come and help me?

"Your most loving,

"CECILY."

"Poor child!" said Aldyth; "I must go at once. Philip, will you let me go in your phaeton? It will save time."

"Yes, we will drive there now."

She was ready in a moment, and we drove to Croft Head. I saw her get out, and caught a glimpse of Cecily's anxious face as she passed into the house, and then I drove home again, sad and mourning, and yet glad to think that I was the friend of Aldyth Sweynson.

CHAPTER XI.

"DEATH IS KING, AND VIVAT REX!"



T this time I used often to think of those sad words from "In Memoriam :"

" I held it truth with him who sings
To one clear harp in divers tones,
That men may rise on stepping stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.

" But who shall so forecast the years,
And find in loss a gain to match ?
Or stretch a hand through time to catch
The far-off interest of tears ?"

Who, indeed ? It is well for us that we cannot by our very natures dwell long upon such questions as that, or the impossibility of finding any answer to them would make our life sadder than it is already.

Aldyth found poor Cecily looking ill and worn out with anxiety.

"I would not have troubled you to come, Aldyth," said she, "after all this, but I know how fond you two are of each other."

"Nothing done for your father is a trouble to me. And now, Cecily, before we go to him, sit down here and tell me all about it. When did you get the news, and what did he say about it?"

"John never came home on Monday night, and we could not imagine where he was. He had gone out early in the afternoon, directly after dinner."

"Ah, to meet her, no doubt."

"The next morning there was a letter, a very short one, from him to father. He said . . . You shall read the letter, Aldyth, if you like. I don't feel as if I could tell you. Here it is."

She gave a letter into Aldyth's hand, shorter even than Caroline's to Harold. It ran,

"DEAR FATHER,

"I do not think it right to do what I am going to do without telling you of it.

"When I came home, I came meaning to marry Aldyth. But she is no longer the same to me. She does not love me as she did; and . . . Caroline and I love each other, and find that we cannot live apart.

"We are going to be married, and shall sail for Australia on Thursday.

"I will not say anything more. I hope you and Aldyth will forgive us.

"I am, your son,

"JOHN FERRIERS."

This letter caused Aldyth more anguish than anything that had yet happened. That John should have deserted her had been grief enough, and too much, but that he should seek to defend himself by saying that she no longer loved him as she had done, was the last drop of agony in her already too bitter cup.

"Oh, Cecily! it is a cruel letter."

Cecily was dissolved in tears. Aldyth was the being whom, with her father, she most loved and revered in the whole world. Of Caroline she had always been afraid, dreading her sharp sayings, and shrinking from the stinging shafts of her sarcasm; and that John, her brother, should prefer Caroline to Aldyth, was a matter wholly inexplicable to her.

"When my father had read it," said Cecily, "he said, 'I have lived too long,—I have lived to see my son do a base thing.' He scarcely spoke at all that day; and yesterday morning, when I went to him, he said he could not get

up—he had nothing left to live for. I sent for the doctor, and he said, ‘Breaking up of the constitution;’ but if John had not done this, it would not have happened. He has asked for you over and over again.”

“Take me to him,” said Aldyth.

Cecily rose, and they went up the narrow farm staircase, along the whitewashed corridor, to the old man’s room. As Aldyth entered, and saw the changed face, and the wistful eyes that turned to her full of love and sorrow, as flowers turn towards the sun, she knew that death was there, and that the days of her old friend—her father, she had called him—were numbered. He held out his right hand to her as she drew near to him, and said in a voice how changed and weak:—

“I knew you would come, Aldyth, my child.”

She fell on her knees by the bedside, clasping his hand in hers, and covering it with tears.

“Always ready, always kind!” he went on. “My own child! my heart’s daughter! It is strange that I should be so pulled down by these doings, is not it? Ah, my dear, you may find it hard to bear now, but you have had a lucky escape. You are more fortunate than you think.”

"It may be for the best, perhaps," she said, through her tears. "At any rate we must not judge them; they did not know what they were doing."

"Like the rest of men," said he—"fools, fools, all of them! Take the glitter and leave the gold with open eyes, and then in a few years turn round and rebuke the glitter for not being gold."

"But you forgive them," said Aldyth, earnestly; "it will be wrong not to forgive them."

"Oh, I suppose I forgive them," he answered, with a gleam of the old caustic humour in his voice; "they acted according to their lights, I suppose, or their darkness, whichever it was, and hating them will do no good, though one cannot help despising them. I never thought that I should come to despise my own son."

"Ah, but despising is not forgiving; you must try not to despise them, I do not."

"I am afraid I must despise them as long as I am here," he answered. "Very soon I shall be where all motives shall be made clear, and I shall understand better then. Just now the world seems all disjointed to me; I cannot understand how it goes on. The wicked and selfish always triumph, and the noble and gentle

are only born to learn how useless their good qualities are. If they cannot manage to stifle them, and live down to the level of meanness and sordidness of the rest, they die, or go mad."

"No, no, they live for ever; their example does good really, even if we cannot see it."

"Well, well, I shall find all that out, as I said. I have not very long now."

"I shall not leave you again."

"The watching will not be tedious."

"Whether it be long or short, father, you are ready whenever you are called."

"I think so, my child, for I fear to stay, not to go."

Aldyth sent word to the Dower House that she should stay all night at Croft Head, and might be there some days.

* * * *

Their task of watching only lasted a week. Each day Mr. Ferriers got weaker and weaker in body, stronger and clearer in mind. The time was one of solemnity to them all, but I dare not say of unhappiness, for there were moments when the quiet joy that both felt banished all the bitter memories of the past, and made them think lovingly even of those who had so sinned against them.

Mr. Ferriers spoke often with Aldyth about both John and Caroline, and one day he told her he forgave them entirely, having come to the conclusion that it was not for him to hate or withhold forgiveness from any of God's creatures, least of all from his own son.

He also talked with her about Cecily.

"She will be left very lonely," he said.

"Not while I live to be her friend," said Aldyth. "Since Emma died she has always seemed like my daughter. I don't know where you would like her to live, but my heart says let her live with me, and I will always take care of her, that is, as long as she needs my care. After that she will care for me, I do not doubt."

"Let it be so," he answered. "I do not thank you, because I know you would not wish to be thanked. When I die, Croft Head must be sold. John will never live here; it had better go to strangers at once, for the sooner our name is forgotten the better. All I have I leave to Cecily. John and I agreed about that before."

This conversation had not been so continuous as I have written it. It had taken place at intervals, as his strength allowed, or his memory prompted, and the day afterwards he died.

His hands were clasped in those of his "daughters;" he died peacefully, calmly; his days were over; the messenger came for him, that

". . . Shadow cloak'd from head to foot,
Who keeps the keys of all the creeds."

Without fear, without resistance, Thomas Ferriers put his hand within that held out to him, passed the dim portals that rise so irrevocably between death and life, those portals closed behind him gently but immutably, and without having been vouchsafed one glimpse of what was on the other side, Aldyth and Cecily found that they were alone.

L'ENVOI.



IT may be thought that the story of Al-dyth's life should here be considered at an end, to all intents and purposes. I do not think so, for I know that she lived afterwards a life as full and complete as before.

It depends upon the idea that one has, as to the *end* of life, the ideal for which we should live, and to which we should bend our hopes and efforts. Hitherto she had lived for one, now she lived for all, and in so living fulfilled her mission upon earth.

The desertion of her lover and the death of Mr. Ferriers saddened her and cast a shadow over her life for years. Even now she is grave and silent; many people call her cold, stiff, and frigid in manner, but not so say those who know her.

The friendship between herself and me begun when I was an unhappy, suffering lad of fifteen, and she a young and beautiful woman of one and twenty, continued through my youth and her womanhood, till I became a man, and could understand and share her troubles—this friendship has never for one moment ceased or flagged. Without noise, without demonstration, it is there, deep in our two hearts. To try and shake or remove it, would be like rending away some vital part. So firm and fast a comfort will never be taken away from us. Though her religious beliefs and mine are as the two poles of the earth—so utterly opposite and different—we both agree in believing one thing, that to all eternity we shall love and know each other; and we trust that when death has removed us from earth, our friendship will be even higher and deeper and holier, Aldyth thinks in heaven, I think in the appointed hereafter, wherever and whatever that may be.

I must say a few words as to some others. First as to John and Caroline.

No special dispensation arrived to punish them for their treachery. They were married in Liverpool, sailed for Australia, and arrived there without either shipwreck or fire; nay, in a very happy frame of mind. That was in the

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first days of their union. They settled down at John's and Edmund's station, which station, by a piece of sentiment on John's part, had been called, years ago, "Campion."

At this new Champion, then, they lived, these three, Caroline, John, and Edmund. Edmund, when he found that it was Caroline who came instead of Aldyth, and had heard the story of what had happened, did *not* instantly call John Ferriers out and challenge him to mortal combat. No, with his usual cynical composure, he took things as they were, deciding that it was human nature for a man to prefer a young and beautiful woman, to a sobered and no longer young one.

The enchantment that hung over the pair has passed away, naturally. Caroline and John Ferriers did not quarrel, or separate, or upbraid each other, and

"Each on each the other's folly charge,"

but all the same they found that, in their case, "Love is enough" did not hold good. Caroline had the worst of it. Her love for John had been the one passion of her life. By nature she was cold and unenthusiastic; he had struck the before untouched chord which had vibrated to

passion, reckless of what anguish it caused to others, so that itself were gratified.

When she found that she could not always love as she had loved at first, and that he would never love her as he had once loved Aldyth, she felt herself undone. In sad earnest she had to call to her aid the cynicism and indifference which she had once, half in jest, half in earnest, professed. She, like Edmund, said, "It is human nature," and smiled a sorry smile to herself as she owned it.

So she lived on, neither glad nor sorry, neither happy nor wretched; but her life, as the years went on, became narrower instead of wider. No punishment had come expressly from heaven for her, but perhaps the gradual disenchantment, the slow, yet steady, fading of all romance and passion, the ever-increasing certainty that she had sinned to win the love, not of a hero or a demi-god, but of a man, and that not an extraordinary man—this, perhaps, was the most bitter punishment that could have befallen her, and some may say, "In that case, it did come from heaven."

I know all this from the letters that Caroline wrote to Aldyth. Harold kept his word. He would neither hear of her, nor send her any message; but Aldyth's heart could not rest at

enmity with her sister. She wrote first, briefly communicating to John the news of his father's death, and of his father's forgiveness. Other letters followed, and after that the correspondence never ceased.

Aldyth shows me all Caroline's letters. Only once has there been any allusion to the past in any of them, but that allusion was a sad one; she said,

"I have sometimes thought I would ask you to forgive me, but I need not now. My punishment is certain, and will endure to the end of my life—and his."

Beside this, I had studied Caroline for so many years that I knew every expression of her different moods, and could guess, from the tone of each letter, how her life was going on.

So must we leave her.

Cecily Ferriers came to live with Aldyth at the Dower House. After a few years, she married—Arthur Wilson.

Robert is in Manchester; much nearer to the estate of a Merchant Prince than he used to be. He is not married. Caroline's conduct cut him up a good deal. In one of her letters, she said, "I would send my love to Robert, if I thought he would accept it."

Aldyth told him of this, and he said,

"Never write to her without sending my love to her."

Harold and Lucy are comfortable, old-fashioned people, leading a monotonous, humdrum life; their worst enemies cannot accuse them of being flighty, either in mind or practice. Their existence has, however, its joys for them, so I suppose. They will not go mad from mental overwork, nor die before their time in the pursuit of any fad or crotchet, social, moral, or intellectual, which is very well, and much to be rejoiced at.

As for Lifton and Esther, my nearest and dearest, after Aldyth . . . I can hardly say more of them than I have done. I firmly believe that there are people, now and then, bright exceptions to the general rule, whose intellects are high, aims noble, hearts true and tender, and who are blessed with worldly advantages and smiled upon by Fortune, in their undertakings. Such, so far, has been the lot of my brother and sister.

Aldyth comes and looks at these last words as I write them, and lays her hand upon mine. I look up, and our eyes meet for an instant—my friend's eyes and mine. I see in her glance that she no longer grieves. As she turns her eyes to the fair scene outside, that high and distant

gaze has no earthward regret in it; it is serene;
it is like the glance of Paracelsus,

“As if where'er you gazed there stood a star;”

and I am reassured. Yet I wonder sometimes
what I have done to deserve that she should be
so much more mine than any one else's.

THE END.

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